

## Too old to be this young

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Hp random love, There are no words for this beauty, Fics that quench my thirst and breathe life into my soul, To remember and cherish, The Heliocentric Discord Server Recs, Tempus et Spatium (Time and Space), my heart is here, Favorite Harry Potter Fanfics, Top-tier Tomarry, Ashes' Library, My soul and heart love Tomarry, Ongoing fic, Lilranko Interesting Read List, fics that kept me staring

at my screen all night, Love these stuff UwU, ✧ Wizarding World Works ✧, Quirky / Insane Characterisations to Die for, incomplete fics that i love, The Moonchilds Library, Best in Fandom, Fics that give me life, Harry Potter, Will Never Stop Obsessing Over These HP, Rosealles Recs, [The Constellation 'Pineapple' recommends these works of art to you], I'm praying these update, I Would Pay Money For These, The VERY BEST of Tomarry, Nothingsweeterthanmybaby, Keeping an eye on these, Kaylen Unfinished Favs, The Overly Toasted Bagel Collection, Llama's favourites, Nih's all-time favorites, I wanna eat you up (like Betty Crocker), Mads fave stories ♥️, noahs\_favorite\_fics, Fanfic Is My Life, The ones I love more than life itself, Unique Re-reads (the BEST fics), ● *Dark Matter* ●, Мои\_любимые\_работы😊, Unofficial TRoR Discord Server Recommendations 2024, The Queen's Picks, HarryPotterdamb, Verywell, JustFabulous' Favorites, Crow's nest of treasures, faroutbrusselssprout, Kudo +1, fics to sink your teeth into

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# Too old to be this young

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## Summary

He was smiling. At Tom Riddle. He was going to get murdered before the year ends, he just knows.

Alternate universe/Post-Hogwarts. warnings: mature themes, drinking, swearing. An adult Harry Potter with all his knowledge and experience is transported to his 23yo body in a universe with no war.

## Chapter 1

It started as one of *those* days. The type that starts with a broken alarm clock that didn't go off, a full cup of coffee that was put down and promptly forgotten, all of his work clothes in the laundry bin and of course, he forgot to buy floo powder yesterday so he couldn't even floo to the Ministry when he was already late. It was practically prophesized that it was going to be a bad day. But Harry, maybe naively, was expecting a bad day as in a fight-with-his-idiot-of-a-boss type of bad day. Maybe even finally getting that demotion that Mr. Fouchy had been threatening him with. So Harry was understandably surprised that the day ended with an area-wide spell that transported him, Auror Pike, and Head Auror Martinez to a place that nightmares feared.

There were rows and rows of doors in pitch-black hallways that never ended, just branched off into other neverending hallways. At first, they weren't too worried. Confident that between them, they would be able to leave this place. But the first door they were able to open led to a horrifying realization. Each door was to a place similar to Earth, but not. The hallways were not a place in their world or even their dimension and those doors did not lead to rooms but goddamned *worlds*.

With time and practice, they discovered the 'rules' as much as this place could have any rules. It was only possible to open the door if your doppelganger in that dimension had *just* died. The door wouldn't open if they were alive or had died years ago.

They knew from opening countless doors and finding themselves in a pool of still-warm blood and other bodily fluids from the doppelganger's recent death. They never stayed for more time than necessary. The moment they assessed that the world wasn't *their* world, they left, which was as easy as wanting to leave closing their eyes and opening them again to hallways of doors.

Harry was secretly glad they weren't forced to crawl out of a grave every time. Waking up to his murder scene was traumatic enough. Harry and Pike were young enough that their deaths were a variation of homicide, accident, or suicide with sometimes a sprinkling of serious illness. Martinez had, more often than not, heart attacks as the cause of death; he had already vowed to watch his diet more and run

every day.

"We are never going to find our door again," Pike whispered, sounding resigned and heartbroken. Harry looked at him and silently agreed. He tried another door that did not open and moved to the next. It was difficult to stay positive after the number of doors they had opened reached triple digits. Between the ones that did not open they had probably tried thousands of doors. They have been at this for what felt like months.

"Have you noticed that we are finding fewer doors that open?" the question bubbled out of Harry like fizz on champagne. He had kept that thought bottled for a week now.

"None have opened for me in this hallway," Martinez agreed.

Head Auror Martinez was the oldest of the three by far and all the doors on this hallway he had died years prior. They tried going back to other doors that had previously opened for Martinez, but none of them opened for him now. The window of opportunity had closed.

"I think... I think I should stay in the next door that opens for me," Martinez said quietly. Harry and Pike stared at him, unable to respond to that. "I don't want to get trapped here," Martinez explained, looking around with a visible shudder. The only thing that kept them from absolute darkness was their wand light. It was like nothing existed outside of their small ring of light.

Harry looked down to his hands and thought of his world, of his friends, and what they would suffer if he never returned.

"I'll stay with you," Harry said looking at Martinez in the eyes and squaring his shoulders. His friends would mourn him, but the infinitely small possibility of finding their original dimension was not worth the very real horror of never leaving this place. They have been at this long enough. He had no family and his friends will understand.

They looked at Pike, who had a wife, a dog, and a house to get back to. In part, they had not stopped looking for Pike, who had the most to lose.

"I don't want to stay here alone," Pike said with desperation and started sobbing. Harry put one hand on Pike's shoulder and Martinez crushed Pike to his chest making shushing sounds.

"It's ok, it's ok," Martinez whispered. "I'm sorry. We'll keep looking,"

Martinez promised.

Pike was nervously moving his wedding band around his finger. "No...no...We will never find our way back." No one had wanted to be the first one to say it, but they have all thought it. This place had no end. They could search for their door their entire lifetime and never find it. Or it could be one of the thousands that never opened.

"Cyndie would kill me if I get trapped here," Pike said, pushing Martinez and cleaning his face with his sleeves. Harry took the chance to hug him too because Pike sounded as if he was burying Cyndie with this decision. And maybe he was.

He has been in this dimension for three years.

That first day he woke up to neck pain, a rope around his neck, and soiled pants. He received the Patronus from Pike and Martinez confirming that they had all entered and sent him back. He didn't recognize the apartment, but by the photos on the wall, it was his. It was smaller than anything he had ever owned and with almost no furniture. The bed was only a mattress on the floor and there was no kitchen to speak of, only a kettle for boiling water and a magical cooler that was used in camping.

After a quick shower, he went to St Mungo's hospital and made an emergency appointment with a Mind-Healer. Three hours later, he was seen by Healer Bates and led to an office. When prompted Harry explained how he woke up after a failed suicide with memory loss. He did not remember why he committed suicide, what happened to him earlier that day, and did not recognize the apartment he woke up in.

After a blood test to confirm that yes, he was Harry Potter, the healer started a fairly standard questioning to assess memory loss that began with his name, age, date, location, and progressed to more complicated details of his life. He was not sure of his age. 23, the Healer said. Harry's eyes widened, he was decades younger. His family was alive and well; that was surprising. He had been a Gryffindor but had never graduated from Hogwarts. He had dropped out after OWLS and for the last seven years had been working on an entry-level position at the Ministry.

With his permission, the Healer did a test that consisted of giving him a prompt like *his mother making breakfast* and read his mind for the automatic memories he should have associated with the prompt. The Healer did this a few times with what was supposed to be big life

events like the birth of his siblings and more mundane things like his father teaching him to ride a broom. There was, of course, no memories of any of this.

The Healer told Harry that he noticed what he called 'false memories' and assured him this was the brain's normal reaction to finding blanks; It was trying to fill the gaps. Confabulation, the Healer called it.

Next came the blood tests and imaging to ascertain his physical health. Finally, the healer had strongly suggested to floo his family and break the news with him as a mediator, but Harry had declined. He had no intention of telling anyone he had 'amnesia'. He only needed the paper trail of amnesia.

There had been mandatory visits every week and then every month until finally, only when Harry needed them. Harry hadn't minded; while not knowing the specifics, Healer Bates had still helped him work out a lot of feelings of anger and abandonment. Not surprisingly, Harry had developed a lot of coping mechanisms that were not exactly healthy.

In the three years he has been here, not once has he talked to 'his' parents. He had seen them from afar, of course, the Wizarding World was small. They had two other children, a girl that was around fifteen when he appeared in this world and a boy that had been starting Hogwarts.

He saw Sirius at the Ministry almost every day. Harry's work started at nine but he liked going earlier to have breakfast at the cafeteria and Sirius started at eight but was almost always late. Every time they saw each other coming out of the floo he would give Harry a tight smile and walk faster.

In the few times they shared the same elevator there was a painfully awkward pat in the shoulder and a 'how you been?' that begged for an easy 'fine and you?'. James Potter was also an Auror, but got on time every morning, took his lunch in his office, and got out of work later than Harry so they rarely crossed paths.

From what Harry gathered from passing comments, photos and asking here and there, he had a great childhood, but when he had decided to leave Hogwarts his parents had made an ultimatum: Leave Hogwarts and we will disown you. They had probably thought the gamble would work and that this-Harry would finish Hogwarts even by the

skin of his teeth. And if he did leave Hogwarts and the safety net of family and comfort, he would come running back, begging them to sign him up to finish his schooling.

It did not work, of course. If there was a common thread to all Harry Potter's of the universe it was that they were stubborn mules with iron cores that planted their feet in front of a dragon and refused to move. It was his best and worst quality. This-Harry had survived. Not thrived, but survived. Until he hadn't.

Martinez, who was also a Head Auror in this world, said that Sirius told him that when Harry had been eighteen the family tried to reconnect but it all went south when Harry had wanted them to meet with his then-boyfriend. Lily had not accepted that. They had cut all contact. Harry was sure there had been an ultimatum there as well. If it was about it being a boyfriend instead of a girlfriend or the identity of the boyfriend there was no way to know. Having no memory of it and with no one to ask he could only speculate.

Harry had no idea who the boyfriend had been. There were no photos, no letters, and in the three years he has been here, no one has contacted him. It made his lack of knowledge a depressing non-issue. The body would have gone unnoticed until his landlord came knocking for the missed rent payments. At first, Harry had wondered why this-Harry never left a letter; now he knew it was because there was no one to read it.

He left his cramped office to wash his hands. The shock of seeing his face in the mirror had lessened over the years and now it was just a fleeting thought. It was his face, but not. The most obvious difference being that he was younger, but there were other small changes in the structure of his face, the shape of his eyes, his nose, and more moles than he was used to. Small changes by themselves, but together they were enough to drastically change his appearance. He dried his hands and left for the cafeteria.

As always, it was busy with the lunch rush. The line was annoyingly long and he was too late for the chicken. After taking a plate of fish he found Martinez and Pike at a table in the back. During the last four years (he was counting the time in the hallways as a year, even if it had felt both like an eternity and a moment) the three of them had gotten impossibly close.

They had gone through horrible moments together. The depression of losing everything, Pike's grief during that first year, Martinez's phobia



for doors that left him shaking and crying and almost cost him the Head Auror position during its worse. Even after three years Harry still woke up drenched in sweat from nightmares of wandering alone over endless hallways with no door opening. Only two people in the world understood the terror of believing he was still trapped there and this was just a hallucination of his mind.

"It's weird isn't it?" Pike asked immediately. Harry looked at where Pike was looking to see Tom Riddle sitting at another table with his usual crowd. He looked as handsome as ever, with silver hair starting to creep at the temple and sharply dressed in black.

"What's weird?" Harry asked, taking his fork. For Harry, the weirdness of a world without Voldemort and with a sane-ish Tom Riddle had left after the first year. It was now the new normal.

"That he's here, at the cafeteria, for lunch," Pike explained. And yeah, now that Harry thought about it he had never seen Riddle at the cafeteria for lunch.

"Must be someone he's courting; you know how he gets when he sets his sights on someone," Martinez responded. Harry did know and he pitied whoever his new victim was. Tom Riddle was no less obsessive than he was in their world, he was just more legal about it. Legal-ish? Well, not genocidal about it at least.

It was interesting, in the ways crime scenes and blood spatters are interesting, to see Voldemort in Tom Riddle. To see the paranoia, the obsessiveness, the greed, the need for control and for others to submit but forced into the neat confines of a corrupt politician. It was...dare he say it, *charming* that his 'only' crimes were money laundering, blackmail, embezzlement, extortion, and bribery. There was maybe the odd political opponent that died in questionable circumstances but foul play was never proven.

It was the Golden Retriever of Voldemort's. Harry was sure this was the limit on how 'good' Tom Riddle could turn out and it was completely by chance that they ended here. This was the first world that accepted the three of them after they decided to leave the search.

"So, Harry, when are you leaving that dusty office and come back to work with me?" Martinez asked, rehashing an old argument.

Harry snorted. "*Never*," he responded with passion. "Being an Auror was a pain in the ass. Besides, I don't have the NEWTs for it."

"I could pull some strings," Martinez insisted.

Pike laughed, "You'd need a shovel to enter Harry Potter to the force. Potter Senior and Black would fight you, you know."

"The sad truth," Harry agreed. It turned out that Lily was Petunia's sister in more than blood and that James Potter never completely grew out from being a bully.

"Those two don't make half the Auror you were Harry," Martinez defended. Martinez held more anger with the Potter family than Harry could scrounge up. As Healer Bates told him, there was a limit to how much a person can feel before they start going numb to less important concerns. Or as Harry interpreted it, he had zero fucks left to give.

"Some days I'm embarrassed they are senior Aurors in the force," Martinez grouched.

Harry gave him a few chips off his plate as consolation. "You know," Harry said, "I'd always help you if you needed, but the Aurors are pure bureaucracy with only a drop of actual excitement. I prefer my job."

"Yeah, and what's that again? Paper pusher number 127?" Pike joked.

"I'd have you know, I'm *the* Communications Dispatcher Trainee," Harry said haughtily. It had taken an embarrassing amount of time to figure out where he worked and what he was supposed to do in his cramped office. No one noticed he hadn't been going to work the first few days and no one missed his job while he figured out his responsibilities. Harry only found out his official title 2 weeks ago.

After he got over the depression of the dead-end job this-Harry had, he started to ... not enjoy it per se, but see the advantages. It was an easy job; stable, with normal hours, and gave him plenty of time for extracurriculars. The pay was exactly the amount he needed to not be destitute and not a Knut more.

He had been working on his Curse-Breaker Master's for the last two years to be able to change jobs. It was a mail program from America that only needed his presence for practical exams. Martinez had pulled some strings to get him to take the graduating tests from Ilvermorny in order to be eligible for a Master's. His current job left him with plenty of time to study while still providing the bare necessities.

"There's this case I'd like to have your opinion on it. I'd never seen anything like it. There have been four deaths already and we have no

more leads."

Pike nodded in agreement, "Weird case. Just your alley, Potter."

"No problem," Harry responded because if there was anything he enjoyed about being an Auror it was solving crimes.

"Are we still going to watch the game tonight?" Harry asked after swallowing another bite of food.

Pike groaned, "Potter if you try to weasel out ONE MORE TIME, I swear to God..."

"I'm going, I'm going, yeesh."

Harry left to dump his plate and leave the cafeteria. He only had fifteen minutes left of his lunch hour and he wanted a coffee from the bakery across the street from the Ministry. He saw Riddle on his way out of the main level of the Ministry. Something made him look longer than he would usually dare.

The longer Harry looked the more he knew something was wrong. He stopped walking and shamelessly stared, taking every detail of Riddle and trying to piece what exactly was wrong with what he was seeing. Riddle inevitably noticed him, their eyes met and at that moment he *knew*. This was not Tom Riddle.

Getting this Tom Riddle imposter to follow him was strangely easy. He just walked confidently and said, "Mr. Riddle, I've been looking for you. You are late for your meeting."

"Ah yes, yes, of course. The meeting," the imposter turned to his group and made his apologies, promising to continue what they were doing in another moment and then turned towards Harry and asked, "Where is it now?"

"I'll show you there, sir," Harry said with a smile and turned to the floo.

"Outside the Ministry?" the imposter asked.

"Yes, sir," And turned towards the imposter with a suspicious frown, "St. Mungus, remember? We had this meeting planned months ago."

"Of course, of course, I remember now. Must have slipped my mind."

The moment the green flames took them, Harry used the distraction to

stun the man. Riddle was heavier than Harry expected and they both toppled out of the fireplace and onto the entrance of St. Mungus.

It was a bit of a hassle to explain why he was dragging an unconscious Tom Riddle around, but finally, a reluctant healer did a screening test and with a serious face called a team to take Riddle away. Harry left shortly after. His lunch hour was over, he had no coffee and a few hours of work to do before he had to leave.

## Chapter 2

It had been a week since he had taken Riddle to the hospital. According to Martinez, he had been possessed for over a week with no one the wiser. The hospital had called the best exorcist and he was recuperating. Rumor around the Ministry was that he had dumped his girlfriend and was incensed with his friends. A lot of people had been fired. It had even made the papers. Thankfully Harry's part had been limited to a "brave ministry employee". The mysterious deaths were linked to demon activity and the case was now closed.

When Harry opened his office at nine on Monday morning he was not *particularly* surprised to see Tom Riddle sitting in his guest chair because he was expecting *something*, but he was surprised Riddle chose to have this confrontation during work hours since he was a renowned workaholic.

He prayed that this-Harry had no prior history with Riddle. The age difference between this-Harry and Tom Riddle was enough that they had probably never interacted. At least, he hoped so.

*God, what if Riddle was the unknown ex-boyfriend?* A part of Harry died at that moment. Riddle was handsome enough that if Harry didn't know he was Satan incarnated he might be tempted. Hell, *even knowing* that Riddle was not above a little genocide here and there did not stop Harry from admiring his broad shoulders. He was glad he eventually learned occlumency.

"Mr. Riddle, it is good to see you well." Harry held out his hand in greeting. After a perfunctory shake, Harry sat down. "How may I help you?" he asked as if this was a normal everyday occurrence.

He had a small voice screaming that this was NOT normal and he shouldn't be shaking Voldemort's hand and why wasn't his wand in his hand right the fuck now? But he did his best to ignore it. After three years of being perfectly normal and sailing comfortably below notice, he was not going to ruin it now. They will have this conversation. Riddle will be satisfied with his answers and leave to never speak with him again.

Riddle stared at him longer than was polite. Harry put his best placid smile that spoke of endless patience. It screamed *I'm good at customer*

service and I'm used to and trained to deal with unruly clients'. As expected, Riddle broke first.

"I'm wondering, Mr. Potter, how out of everyone, it was *you* that noticed something was amiss."

"I'm sure someone would have noticed soon enough," Harry demurred. "I'm sorry that that happened to you," and strangely enough Harry did feel a bit sorry for the poor bastard. It had to be rough that no one could tell you have been possessed by *an actual, literal demon* for an entire week, even if it was a problem all of Riddle's own making. A lifetime of masks and keeping people at arm's length had consequences.

But then again, and Harry couldn't stress this enough, *no one noticed the difference between an actual demon and Riddle*. It blew the mind. And made perfect sense. He can just imagine an assistant interrupting DemonRiddle from eating the entrails of an intern and just apologizing and quietly closing the door.

"I'm glad that I could've helped and that you have recovered," Harry gave him his most brilliant smile, dimples and all, because this face had a cuteness that his face didn't have, and hell if he wouldn't abuse that. Riddle looked from his clapped hands to Harry seriously, not at all moved by the dimples. The sociopath.

"Mr. Potter we have never talked." Harry mentally breathed a relieved sigh and his shoulders relaxed marginally. "I reviewed the memory from someone that was there. You only looked at me for seconds before you approached me. I want to know *how you knew?*"

Harry felt the push of magic wash over him like *Imperio* whispering *tell the truth*. Without warning the memory of the voice of a young Tom saying '*I can control animals, make them do as I like*' flashed through his mind. That terrifying child grew up to be an even more terrifying man.

Harry relaxed back in his chair and thought about how to best respond. Riddle was paranoid and Harry didn't want to make him think he had been somehow involved. For once, Harry *wasn't* involved in a plot against Riddle. New world, new Harry.

"We saw you at lunch," he finally responded, looking up to see Riddle staring intensely. "Pike mentioned how strange it was that you were eating at the cafeteria. I didn't think much of it until I saw you again on my way out. I'm not sure what stood out..." Harry brushed his curls

back in frustration. It was difficult to explain a train of thought when there had been no thought.

"It's like you said," Harry shrugged, "I looked at you and I just knew. It was not you. Not your posture, not your smile, not your frown, not your gestures, not your mannerism. It was simply *not you*. I was thinking more along the lines of someone using polyjuice potion, but whatever it was, I knew St. Mungus would figure it out." It was the entire truth as Harry knew it.

Well, except the part that he had harbored Tom Marvolo Riddle's soul for close to seventeen years, talked to his Horcruxes, wore one like a collar for a bit, and had studied the man's life in a mad quest to take him down. Without even getting how he had been keeping an eye on him for the last three years, the first year out of suspicion and the last two out of curiosity.

But, details.

Riddle smiled his lopsided smile and Harry felt his stomach turn to ice and his expression brittle because Riddle looked *interested*. And the last thing Harry wanted was a Tom Riddle that was interested in him. Again.

It tended to end with his death.

Harry looked down at his papers for a second as if he was unable to stop himself from worrying about work and looked up at the clock. It was a perfectly obvious ploy, but thankfully Riddle bit the bullet and stood. "Thank you for indulging me, Mr. Potter."

Harry breathed out in relief. Almost over.

"I'll like to take you to lunch today, as gratitude," Riddle said with his hand on the door handle.

"No need, Mr. Riddle," Harry responded, pretending to be already absorbed with the papers in front of him.

"Just the same, I would like to," Riddle replied with enough force that Harry looked up from his papers to see Riddle's frown.

"And I would prefer not to," Harry stressed with an equally displeased frown. "Have a good day, Mr. Riddle," he dismissed.

He heard the door close and dropped his head to his hands. He should

have sucked it up and went to lunch, but middle age gave him no tolerance for bullshit and he felt no need to do things he didn't want to do. The time of dancing to other people's tune had stopped after he died and *nothing changed*.

*Fuck*, he thought as he realized his mistake. He hadn't even pretended to have felt the Imperio-like magic. He should have opened his eyes and slacked his mouth or something. Whatever. It didn't matter. Besides, it was too late to do anything about it now. He moved more papers around, not even knowing what he was doing with them. It's been more than two years that he didn't have to manually do the job. He activated the spell he had created and the office came to life with papers flying to their places.

It was unjust how older Tom Riddle was even more handsome than younger Tom Riddle. He grew into his bone structure like perfectly aged wine and the white of his temples... Harry groaned. He felt no shame in admitting it. Not admitting it was trying to deny reality. It was perfectly reasonable to hate someone and find them attractive. It's not like he would ever do something about it.

He needed to start dating.

He was somewhat nervous going to the cafeteria. Which was rich because he had walked to his death with more confidence than this. But he still made sure to take the long way and used stairs and hallways Riddle had no business being. He made it to their lunch table without trouble and finally relaxed. Maybe that was it. A brief meeting and they will continue their separate ways.

He dropped his plate to the table and sat down, "So you wouldn't believe what happened," he started with a shit-eating grin.

"Riddle?" Pike croons, "tell me!" he pushed forward on the table, almost on top of Harry. "Did he push you against a wall all tall and sexy demanding for answers?"

Harry tilted his head and looked at Pike suspiciously, "that's oddly specific."

Pike shrugs, shameless. "Can you blame me? Two handsome men with all that tension," he cackles. Martinez slaps the back of Pike's head but looks at Harry expectantly.

"Nah, nothing out of a porno." Sadly. "There was a bit of posturing,



some strongly worded suggestions but it was over without wands being drawn or bloodshed."

"Man, I miss high-speed internet porn," Pike went on a tangent, as was normal for him. "Now is all shit magazines with girls in frilly swimsuits," Pike lamented. Martinez grunted in agreement and Harry nodded. Lack of quality porn was indeed a problem when they been single the three years they been here.

"At least we have TV and telephones," Martinez said. The lack of war had permitted the Wizarding World to catch up with modern times. So at least there was that.

"Going back to me; he invited me for lunch."

"Shit man, what did you say?"

"No. Obviously."

Pike cackled. "No way! I'm betting his face was like a sour lemon."

Harry nodded smugly. "It was like he was hearing no for the first time. Glorious."

"Be careful, Harry," Martinez warned. "You know that this isn't like our you-know-what. Here it's only democracy on paper." Riddle was The Government. He was behind every Minister and the Ministry danced to his tune.

"Spoilsport," Pike grumbled.

"It's going to be *fine*. He's going to forget I exist soon enough." Even Pike looked unconvinced, which Harry thought was unfair. He was perfectly forgettable when he was just Harry and not the Boy-who-lived.

It was as he was leaving work that it happened. Riddle and his usual crew were by the floo. Harry never saw Riddle on his way out of work. First of all, because the man seemed to live in the ministry. And second, because he had a private connection in his office that he used. So this was clearly planned.

Most worrying of all was that Riddle's gaze reminded Harry of the time he had been the center of attention of a nesting dragon. Clearly, he was Riddle's newest victim. Fucking hell. It goes to show that no good deed ever goes unpunished. He should have left the wanker

possessed. It had been none of his goddammed business. He should have walked away and left it at that. It would have *probably* been fine if no one could even tell the difference. The demon had it handled. And the demon wouldn't have stalked Harry. He obviously traded down.

"Mr. Potter," Riddle called when Harry was close enough.

Harry's eyes shifted towards the closest floo. He wondered if he could somersault to it before Riddle caught up to him. He gave the odds 50/50. The odds of not cracking his head on the fireplace mantle were significantly less. A witch stepped in front of the fireplace Harry had been eyeing giving Riddle the extra second he needed to catch up to him.

"Hello again, Mr. Riddle," Harry responded with a tense smile. His lackeys surrounded Harry. There were many familiar faces of Death Eaters that made his fingers twitch but also new faces. The human wall made a break for it considerably more difficult but not impossible, Harry was nothing if not an escape artist. He kept walking forward without slowing down, forcing the circle to follow to continue the mimicry of normalcy.

"We are going to the bar to celebrate Crabbe's promotion. You should come with us," Riddle said putting his arm around Harry's shoulders. What? Did Riddle think he could pressure Harry into going because there was a crowd? *Ha!* Joke's on him. Harry didn't give a fuck. He shrugged off the arm without even bothering to pretend he wasn't because who the hell touches people they don't know? A sociopath, that's who.

(Would it be weird to ask what cologne Riddle used? Because wow.)

Still walking, Harry looked over his shoulder to Crabbe and smiled, big and fake. "Congratulations on your promotion, Mr. Crabbe. I'm sorry to say I won't be able to join you, but have fun!"

Harry was close enough to a floo that he was able to step forward, wave goodbye, and floo out.

Fuck them.

## Chapter 3

The next few weeks continued in the same vein. Riddle would catch him when Harry least expected him and invite him to something or other. Harry without fault would say no. Riddle seemed to be under the delusion that if he could find the right *place* Harry would relent. Invitations included but were not limited to exclusive restaurants, VIP passes to quidditch games, movies, and the memorable occasion of dinner at his apartment.

At first, Harry was perfectly polite with vague but firm denials. But as the invitations continued relentlessly his patience fractured. And then ran dry. And then the entire forest went up in fucking flames because it has been WEEKS. The expressions of his followers when Harry flat out denied him were priceless. The slack-jawed, wide-eyed petrified faces were a balm to Harry's tired soul. Yeah, yeah, he knew he was going to die for the slight. But he would die laughing dammit.

Harry's excuses ranged from plausible to absurd. Including classics like "washing my hair today", "not dressed for the occasion", and "Riddle, I would sacrifice a finger before showing up at the Malfoy Charity ball". It had been only Riddle for that last one so he felt more at ease to express his opinion. Riddle's laughter had accompanied Harry until he left the hallway.

Harry wasn't too worried about Riddle's persistence yet. From what he'd seen in the last three years, Riddle's obsessions were short-lived (to the dismay of many of his victims). Harry had a few more months before his vacation started and after that he fully expected Riddle to have moved on to a new victim.

"I'm just saying," Harry responds as he picks up his beer to sip, "Sex with Riddle has to be horrible." It was his birthday and they were out celebrating at a popular bar. "No, no, no, hear me out," Harry interrupted what would have been Pike's loud protest.

"He is selfish and self-centered. That's a fact. He probably spends like a minute in foreplay, if any, three minutes jackhammering while his partner is looking at the ceiling trying to make the best out of a bad situation and then collapsing on the bed, putting up his trousers and leaving."

Pike laughed so loud he drooped his beer on the table. "True, true. But *the view*, man. *The view*. A shirtless Riddle all sweaty on top of you." Pike fawned himself with the napkins for the spilled beer.

Harry looked skeptical, "Sweaty? From what? His four minutes of hard work?" Pike snorted so hard he choked on his beer.

Martinez was looking faintly nauseous. "I can't believe you both gave it any thought, much less this much thought. I have a meeting with Riddle this week. I won't be able to look at him in the eye," Martinez complained.

Harry and Pike ignored him. "You don't think he has some S&M type of bullshit kink?" Pike whispered/shouted. Martinez signaled him to keep it down, looking around in panic for anyone that might be listening.

Harry put the beer-soaked napkins in a pile at the center of the table shaking his head vigorously. "No way!" Harry protested loudly. Martinez shushed him and told him to fucking stop shouting before the entire bar hears. "He's probably as vanilla as they come. Bellatrix tho, her kinks probably have kinks."

"Would you prefer vanilla sex with Riddle or go down into Bellatrix's sex dungeon?" Pike asked seriously.

Harry gave it serious thought. "I'll probably die with Bellatrix from some oxygen deprivation bullshit tied up like a pig for slaughter. She doesn't seem to be into the whole safeword thing. So I'll go with vanilla sex with Riddle. But like, maybe if I'm dying anyway? If it's my last day on Earth?"

"And you Martinez?"

"Meh, worst ways to die."

Pike and Harry exploded in laughter and cheers while Martinez's face turned red with embarrassment and hushed them.

"I'll get the next round," Harry said as he took out his wallet and pushed his way to the bar. He was a little wobbly.

"Harry, blimey is that you?"

Harry turned around and smiled. "Ron! It's good to see you, man." He looked behind Ron to see Hermione. "Hermione! Hi."

"Harry!" Hermione screamed and hugged him. "It's been too long!"

Harry laughed and went with them to say hi to Ron's brothers that were at a table on the other side of the bar and get introduced to Hermione's friends from her Mastery and Ron's buddies from quidditch.

"You still at the Ministry, Harry?" Charlie asked curiously.

"Yeah," Harry responded with a smile, ignoring Hermione's frown. After a few more moments he said his goodbyes, went back to the bar to grab the beers and pushed his way to his table.

"Finally!" Pike groused.

"I bumped into Hermione and Ron," Harry explained.

"What are they doing now?" Martinez asked taking the beers from him and passing one to Pike.

"Hermione finished her Mastery and Ron is a substitute keeper for Chudley Cannons." He was proud of his friends' accomplishments, but without a war to bind them together, they were only friendly acquaintances at best. They didn't even remember that today was his birthday. But as they hadn't written or visited in three years it was safe to say the friendship was a superficial one at best.

Martinez put an arm around him as if he could protect him against heartbreak with his body.

"Your armpit smells," Harry complained because he was still unused to being comforted. Martinez squeezed him harder and then pushed him away to pay attention to his beer.

"Brat," he huffed.

As the night progressed more Aurors sat at their table and insisted on buying more rounds of beer until Harry had absolutely no idea what was happening.

"And then..." Johnson stopped with his story with how much he was laughing, "then Pike jumped out of the window and landed face-first on the restaurant's trashcan." The entire table roared in laughter and Pike whined about bullying.

Harry was laughing so hard he was wheezing. He was dying. His chest

hurt, his face hurt. "I'm I asthmatic?" he asked the table worriedly. He chugged his beer to stop himself from laughing anymore but Pike mentioned how the trash was mostly rotten food and his beer made an unwelcome comeback through his nose.

"Fucking hell Harry!" Someone threw napkins at him, which he gratefully used to mop-up the beer pooling on the table.

"I have to pee," he announced to the table seriously because the filters had come off three beers ago. After a few false starts, he was able to wobble to the loo. Youngest Seeker of the century or no, he peed on almost everything but the inside of the bidet. He washed his hands because he was drunk, not a savage. He was closing the door when Charlie materialized right in front of him.

"Charlie, hey!" he greeted with a confused smile before he was crowded and a tongue shoved into his mouth without warning.

Harry pushed him back. "The fuck, Charlie?" he asked angrily.

"I'm sorry," Charlie said, not looking very fucking sorry. "It's just you are looking so good tonight and you were looking at me as if we were strangers."

Oh.

Charlie was the ex-boyfriend. Fuck. Well, at least it wasn't Riddle or Malfoy. But fuck if he wasn't mad on behalf of this-Harry. Harry punched Charlie in the face with as much coordination as he was capable under his state and the man staggered back looking gobsmacked.

"Fuck off," he said and stumbled back to his table.

He was in hell the next morning. A fucking Monday. Why the hell did they go out drinking on a fucking Sunday? Ah, right, his birthday. His right hand hurt. This-Harry had probably never thrown a punch in his life. He had the worst hangover of his miserable life. He opened every cabinet on the small, decrypt apartment but there wasn't one single hangover potion. He left for the Ministry at almost nine, too late to catch breakfast at the cafeteria, and just managed to reach his office on time.

"I heard you had fun last night."

Harry jumped and whirled towards the sound, "*Goddamit, Riddle!* I almost had a heart attack," Harry said with one hand to his poor heart and the other to his mouth. He breathed through the sudden urge to vomit until his rolling stomach calmed down. His head pounded with the sudden adrenaline rush battling it out with his dehydration. "Can you not creep in other people's offices?" he grouched.

Riddle extended a hand with a to-go coffee cup from the bakery across the street.

"Black, with sugar," Riddle tempted with a smirk. *God*, he was handsome. Harry stared at the coffee and licked his dry lips. His eyes went from Riddle's smug face to the coffee and back again.

So this was how the Great Harry Potter would be defeated? Hermione would be so disappointed. Ron would understand. Harry sighed. He reached for the coffee. "Worst ways to go, I guess," Harry murmured.

"Better ways to go," Riddle parried with a smile that had too many teeth. It was too early for Harry to interpret the many smiles of Tom Riddle so he contented with sipping the coffee. Black, two sugars. From his favorite place. What a creep.

Now that he had Harry's attention, Riddle leaned against the wall and crossed his arms. "Heard you punched one of the Weasley's."

Harry frowned perching against his desk for support. "I don't remember seeing one of yours there." But the second half of the night was fuzzy with too much beer and laughter. For all Harry had been paying attention Riddle could have been there.

"Crouch Jr. had a date."

Harry snorted, the laugh pulled out almost against his wishes. "Ah. And who was the poor thing? Did he have to *Imperio* them?"

Riddle smiled, looking genuinely amused and surprised. "His father arranged the blind date."

"Figures," Harry said with a smile. He was smiling. At Tom Riddle. He was going to get murdered before the year ends, he just knows.

"Happy belated Birthday," Riddle pushed the wall and walked the two steps he needed to reach Harry. "I would have taken you to a much nicer place... if you'd let me."

Was... Was Riddle *flirting*? With *him*? Harry felt the laughter bubble out of him. *The gall*. He put the hand that wasn't holding the cup on Riddle's chest and pushed. "The place was good," Riddle stepped back; Harry pushed more, "the company great." One more step. "I have no complaints." Harry opened the door and pushed Riddle towards the door. "I'll see you around, Riddle."

"And the punch to Weasley?" Riddle pressed.

"Very much deserved."

"Why?"

"Some people don't understand the meaning of *no*," Harry said looking at Riddle pointedly. Riddle got the message and left without another word. Harry shook his head and closed the door.

It would seem that Riddle was a big believer in the wisdom of '*don't change the winning recipe*' because every morning after that day he met Harry with a cup of coffee. After the third morning, Harry resigned himself that this was his life now and led Riddle to the cafeteria to have breakfast. There was no use being hungry if he was going to be stalked anyway.

He could say no to the coffee and turn Riddle away but... it was expensive coffee and Harry did not make enough money to buy it more than once a month as a rare treat. He could exchange an hour of his morning for that coffee. Easily.

It did not surprise Harry that Riddle was an excellent conversationalist; he had talked with the Horcrux in the journal and had found it engaging. What surprised Harry was how many interests they had in common. And the bright excitement in Riddle's eyes when they got deeper into a subject. And his loud laugh when Harry was being particularly stubborn or difficult. It was not what Harry had expected from the man.

Conversation flowed easily from the moment they met at the floo, to their short walk to the cafeteria, and sitting down with plates of eggs and toast. Even on the mornings Harry woke up sullen and drawn after a nightmare, Riddle would slowly draw him into a conversation.

By the end of the week, Riddle knew more of his day-to-day life than anyone except Pike and Martinez. But that was probably because no one else seems to care about what Harry Potter is up to. Eventually,



Harry opened up about his Masters and his plans after graduation, and Riddle talked more about his work in the Ministry.

It quickly became apparent that Riddle enjoyed finding the limits of his knowledge; poking and prodding subjects until Harry admitted defeat. From his decades as an Auror, Harry's knowledge of the occult would give anyone palpitations but it was nothing compared to a Master of Dark Arts like Riddle that had dedicated a lifetime to studying it. It was alarmingly easy for Harry to get used to the new routine of having breakfast with Riddle.

The second week Bellatrix followed them to the cafeteria to sit down with them for breakfast. Bellatrix had to be around fifty but still young-looking (not going to Azkaban was fantastic on the skin), beautiful, sharp, and ruthless. Like in his world, she married Lestrangle and was still (mercifully) childless. She was a badass woman and Harry would like her if she didn't simmer behind Riddle and stared daggers at him. It made eating uncomfortable. Harry made his excuses and left after ten minutes. He took it back; he wouldn't go to her sex dungeon even if they paid him.

The next day Lucius sat at their table as they were debating the correct placement of blood during a ritual. Harry greeted Lucius and in the same breath announced it was already time to leave for his office. It was 8:20 am.

After that, no one sat with them. Riddle dismissed anyone who approached them before they got too close. Harry would like to say he was training Riddle, but more than likely it was Riddle who trained him to *sit* and *stay*.

"Riddle, do you want to die in a horrible, explosive way? Because I see no other result from this and frankly there are easier ways to kill yourself if that's what you are aiming for," Harry asked as he analyzed the ritual.

Harry was by no one's standard a genius. But after a few decades in the Auror Force, you tend to see a fair bit of rituals, and Harry was particularly drawn to the subject. He eventually got to be the go-to guy for ritual mishaps. Not many people got to be an ingredient in a dark ritual at fourteen (and survived). The experience gave him a vested interest in learning the craft (and you know, *not be an ingredient* in a dark arts ritual).

"It will work," Riddle insisted with a fierce frown. As if he could

intimidate Harry into agreeing. How cute.

Harry smirked and returned the paper to Riddle, "Yeah, at blowing you up."

Riddle looked at the paper with frustration and Harry took pity on him.

"How bout you try it out with a frog first and let the frog suffer for your mistakes."

"There are no mistakes," Riddle insisted with a petulant frown.

"Sure." Harry hid his smile in his coffee.

That night as Harry lay on his mattress and stared at the cracked ceiling he received an owl with a box. Inside were the remains of a frog with a note. *Please come help if you have the time.*

He looked around at his empty derelict apartment and thought *fuck it*.

Riddle's apartment was as big and posh as Harry had expected it to be. With high ceilings, classic architecture, and modern decoration. But it felt like entering a sauna from the released energy of the failed ritual. Harry took his jacket off immediately and rolled his sleeves. The ritual took most of the living room floor. The sofas and table were cramped in a corner.

"*Riddle*," Harry groaned, "you are *killing me*. Why in the seven hells do you insist on using blood, entrails, *and* bone for this ritual? It doesn't call for it."

Riddle's jaw clenched. "It's stronger that way."

"Theoretically. Practically it just makes things go boom in really horrible ways. Come on," Harry cajoled, "take out the bone. You don't need the bone."

Riddle breathed deeply like a bull ready to trample, "*Fine*," he spat out like the brat he secretly was.

"Where's the wine?" Harry asked as he walked towards the massive open kitchen that was visible from the living room. He opened the cupboards randomly until he found what he was looking for. He took out two wine glasses.

"So needy," Riddle mocked as he searched the fridge for the wine. Harry looked at the label and was not surprised to see his favorite red wine. The creepy creep being a creep.

"Oi! I'm doing this for free, you know," Harry grumbled. When he had his glass of wine he returned to the living room to study the markings closely.

"You realize we'll have to start over?" Harry asked over his shoulder. Riddle grunted.

"You have tattoos?" Riddle asked looking at his back. His sweaty white shirt was probably plastered to his back and doing a bad job of hiding his tattoos.

"Yeah, a few," Harry hedged.

"Can I see them?"

Riddle's hungry eyes made Harry shift in place. "Don't be a creep, Riddle. Come here and help me clean this up."

Riddle snorted but obligingly put his sleeves up to start the cleanup. Two bottles of wine, three hours later, and some choice curse words they had a working ritual. Riddle looked from the intact frog to him.

"You're terrifying, you know that?"

"I know."

He never learned not to flirt with danger.

## Chapter 4

"You've been happier," Martinez remarked at lunch. After shifting in his chair he added quietly, "You know we'd love you no matter what."

"Even if I'm friendly with Tom Riddle?" Harry asked because if they were having this conversation might as well be clear about it.

"Dude, you can choke on his dick every day for all we care. Life is short, be happy and all that crap," Pike said waving his fork.

"Man, what Healer did you get? I want the same one," Harry joked.

"Fuck off."

"Did your vacations get approved?" Harry asked. It was not a subtle change of subject but he had reached his limit for talking about Riddle. Pike and Martinez nodded.

"Still camping?" Pike grimaced.

"Yes, when it's your turn to pick our vacation spot you can choose casinos. Again," Harry said with a roll of his eyes.

"Do you mind if I invite some of the boys for the weekend? They'd really enjoy camping," Martinez asked as he moved his salad around the plate and bit into it with a grimace.

"Yeah, sure."

Both Pike and Martinez stopped eating to stare at him.

"Just like that?" Pike asked suspiciously.

"Yeah, no problem."

"Potter," Martinez hissed dropping his fork. Harry moved his vegetables with determination and avoided eye contact.

Pike dropped his head at the table and wailed. Harry shushed him and looked around to see many heads turning in their direction.

"You are going to kill us aren't you?" Pike accused. Loudly. *God* he was

going to leave the cafeteria in handcuffs if Pike didn't shut up.

"Don't be dramatic," Harry whispered. "We just. Uh. Are doing a small detour from our scenic vacation. And maybe having a backup is not a bad idea."

"Potter. Explain," Martinez barked. Man, he needed new friends. Preferably some that didn't know him too well.

"Look, my thesis project is due soon and I really think I can blow it out of the park. I just need, uh, your trust?"

"Fuck, I'll have to pack an arsenal won't I?" Martinez complained.

"I'm expecting minimal trouble," Harry placated.

"It's going to be a shit show," Pike said with certainty.

"So, what's that about you killing Pike and Martinez?" Riddle asked the moment Harry was out of the floo. Harry grabbed the coffee from Riddle's hand and sipped.

"Just how many informants do you have?" he wondered, bothered by how unbothered he was. Riddle's smile was all teeth. Yeah, stupid question. Lots.

"Pike was being dramatic," Harry said as they made their way to the cafeteria. "I just told him of a small change in our vacation."

"The camping trip?"

"The fuck?" Harry shot a wild-eye look at Riddle. That was stepping over creepy and dancing towards hair-raising.

"It's not exactly a secret if you invite half the Auror force. Apparently, you are expecting some trouble?" Riddle asked mildly as if he didn't care either way. Harry looked at him suspiciously.

"There will be no trouble," Harry said firmly. Maybe if he said it enough times people would start believing him. He opened the door for Riddle with his shoulder and they entered the noisy cafeteria.

At Riddle's deadpan face, Harry amended, "I'm expecting minimal trouble at worst." Riddle huffed and did not bother to respond as they grabbed their plates and paid.

"When is this again?" Riddle asked as he took out his planner from his pocket and wedged it between their plates.

Harry jabbed at his eggs. "There's no need for you to come. It will be *fine*." Harry was insulted by the skeptical eyebrow raise. It's not like Riddle had the knowledge to back up that claim. Pike and Martinez on the other hand...well, they had more reasons to suspect.

Harry glanced down at Riddle's planner to see his name written on the 8:00-9:00 am block from Monday to Friday for the entire month. Harry laughed. *The creep*, he thought fondly. Riddle didn't even seem remotely embarrassed.

"It's the second week of January but most of the Aurors are only going for the first weekend so I'm planning to go on my, uh, field trip? the first Saturday." He pointed out the week, "You're busy." The entire week was a pack full of meetings and the weekend had social events.

Riddle turned his full attention to Harry. "What is it that you are planning?"

Harry's eyes lighted with enthusiasm and he leaned forward. Riddle unconsciously imitated him.

"So I've had this theory for a while," Harry whispered. "It's just something I've been working on in my free time and last week I finally cracked it. I believe I know where Atlantis is." Harry's face almost hurt from how wide he was smiling. "The historians had it all wrong, it's not buried at sea. It's inside an underground cave and the entrance is below the lake. I used last weekend to scout the entrance and I'm almost certain it's there."

"If you're expecting trouble I'm guessing finding the lost city of Atlantis is not the most important part of the story?" Riddle asks with a sardonic smile. Harry sat down and backed off when he realized how close he was to Riddle's face.

"No. I believe that opening the cave will unleash something," Harry said with barely suppressed glee. Relishing in the opportunity to share his findings with another person. "Everything I've ever found paints a much darker picture of how Atlantis fell than what the history books tell."

Riddle frowned. "What's your theory?"

"The books say that the ritual that fell Atlantis had something to do

with everlasting life. I believe they were successful with their ritual, just not how they wanted it. The runes they used were wrong. It's not everlasting life that the runes describe but *lack of death with a hunger for life*. They were not granted everlasting life, but deathlessness."

Riddle frowned, not convinced. "You believe there are people still alive in those caves?"

"No, not alive," Harry gushed, his eyes bright with unholy glee, "but unable to die."

Riddle's eye widened, "Inferi?"

"Inferi, zombies, animated corpses, something in that family," Harry said carelessly. "My thesis theory is that the ritual that was supposed to grant immortality for the Royal Family and palace officials instead created immortal cannibal-like creatures that later went to kill the rest of the population, possibly passing on the curse. And that's why Atlantis fell with no survivors."

"Why cannibals?"

"In its original language, the rune translates as lack of death *with a hunger for life*. I've seen a similar set of rune work in Brazil. It was...uh, quite literal. The results were not pretty. My thesis professor agrees that my interpretation is possible but she doesn't think it's likely."

"I'm going." Riddle took a quill and crossed out the entire week. "So," Riddle smirked, "Harry Potter, with you its 'minimal trouble' expecting an entire city of Inferi-like creatures? Good to know." Harry loved that teasing expression in Riddle's face. He flushed and went back to his breakfast.

"It's only a theory. And it has been more than a millennium. They are probably slowly walking dust particles by now."

Maybe.

"You know, when I graduated from Hogwarts I wanted to travel the world but I got sucked into the Ministry black hole instead. I wished I had you back then."

Life with the Dursleys had not prepared Harry with the emotional tools for anything other than anger, jealousy, and disappointment. Adulthood had only marginally helped.

"I'm sure there was a Gryffindor you could have convinced," Harry deflected.

"None of them would have been you."

Harry bit his plastic fork and wished for a sudden emergency. It's a shame that the Ministry was never invaded unless Harry himself was behind it.

"It worked out for you. You were able to be the youngest Minister and got reelected two times."

"True," Riddle said with the most insufferable look, and thankfully let the subject change.

"Martinez, wait up!"

Martinez looked back to see Black and Potter Sr. on his heels. As he waited to see what they wanted he called on all the patience his body had to spare. It was not much.

While no one wanted to acknowledge it, the Auror force was divided into two camps. There were Potter's friends and Martinez's group. Martinez had not set out to divide the force when he came to this world but he was unable to stand Potter and Black for more than necessary. In his world, neither James Potter nor Sirius Black had been part of the force because they had been dead for a long time.

The only Potter he was used to working with was the incredibly talented, exceptionally stupid, highly competent Harry Potter. And while Harry Potter more often than not, ignored commands and had gone to do what the fuck he wanted to do, Harry Potter had never lost a fight, left a man behind, or failed a mission. The same could not be said about these two fuckers that thought everything was a game.

He wasn't the only one that was unimpressed with the duo trying to relive their golden years from Hogwarts at the force. Sadly the name Potter and Black carried weight and as much as they fucked up, they only got a mild slap in the hand. And that's without getting at the fact that they abandoned *their* Harry Potter. Isolated him to the point he felt unwanted, unloved, and so depressed he preferred the relief of death to this life. Even without ever meeting their Harry, Martinez would bet he was the same intelligent, caring idiot with a golden heart and did not deserve what had happened to him.



"What's this I hear about a department camping trip?" Black asked with a smile on his punchable face.

"It's not a department camping trip." Martinez turned and pointedly started walking, hoping he could escape this conversation.

"Well, not officially but everyone's talking about it. I'm great at BBQ and we have this huge tent that we use for the Quiddich World Cup that we could bring."

Martinez closed his eyes and pinched his nose. He looked at the ceiling for godly intervention but no such luck. "Neither of you are invited."

"What! Why?" Black squawked. *Because I despise you*, but since it was still work hours, "Because it's my vacation and I don't want to deal with either of you." Dealing with them during work hours was enough of a chore.

"That's harsh," Potter Sr. admonished with a frown. "If everyone else was invited..."

"Was I not clear? Not invited. Everyone was not invited. My friends were invited. For fuck's sake, why are we having this conversation? If you want a camping trip plan it yourself."

After that Martinez heard that Black and Potter had been whining about it in the break room. In less than an hour, Martinez was called to a meeting where he had to explain how the camping trip was during his vacation days and in no part related to his job.

And *no*, he was not excluding Potter Sr and Black as retaliation for the prank they pulled last week. (Even if he hadn't forgotten it nor forgiven them). Martinez could see how management was just about to force him to invite the entire force for a 'team-building exercise' or at least not specifically exclude anyone. If that happened, Martinez was going to give the fuckers some other direction and let them camp out in the middle of a fucking bear-infested place by themselves.

Martinez knew the moment Riddle intervened. The abruptness of the change in tone spoke of someone higher up intervening and he knew no one else that would do it. Management did a one-eighty and told Black and Potter that it was a private event and to coordinate their own team-building exercise if they wanted one.

The play had not won them any points with the rest of the force. It

was tacky to invite yourself to someone else vacation. Most of Martinez's friends knew that Harry was going and someone must have talked about it because the hour before lunch all anyone could talk about was how Potter and Black had wanted to crash the vacation of the son and godson they had abandoned.

Harry was getting ready to go to lunch when there was a tentative knock on his door. "Come in," he called. His eyes widened at seeing his Godfather. This was the first time Sirius had sought him out in three years.

"Sirius, how can I help you?"

Sirius was shifting uncomfortably at the door. Harry watched him dispassionately and that seemed to make him even more anxious. "I'm just wondering... if you might want to have lunch with me today?" he asked tentatively. *Why now?* Harry wondered.

"Thanks for the invite, but I already have plans." Had this been three years ago he would have jumped at the opportunity. But not now. Not after three years.

"Ah. That's ok. Maybe tomorrow?"

"Not possible." After an awkward silence, Harry pressed, "Is that all?"

"You know I'm here if you ever want to talk."

"Hmm."

A minute passed before Sirius spoke again. "People are saying we abandoned you." Sirius looked simultaneously heartbroken and defensive about the accusation. Ah. That's the reason for the sudden need to connect. Harry thought his heart couldn't possibly break more after so many years but he felt it break all the same. Harry took a moment to compose himself, cleared his face from all expressions, and willed his hands to not shake.

"It's that what you think?" Sirius asked.

"I didn't know my opinion on the subject mattered."

Sirius sighed as if his response frustrated him. "Look, kid, I've told you a thousand times, you only have to apologize."

*Kid.* He was a twenty-seven-year-old man and Sirius still thought him

as a kid that needed to apologize to the parents that had cut him more than a decade ago for not being the ornament they had wanted.

He didn't need this bullshit from Sirius. Harry looked at the clock. He was going to miss out on the chicken. "I'm going to lunch, Sirius. Have a nice day," Harry said as he pushed past Sirius to get to the door.

"Lily and James are good parents," Sirius insisted almost desperately. "You only have to apologize. It's not like it was with me."

Harry let the door shutting respond for him.

There was no chicken left. Harry picked the soggy fish with more violence than necessary and dropped his plate at their table. By Martinez and Pike's faces, he wasn't the only one in a foul mood.

"Let's go drinking tonight," Harry suggested. "I could do with a shot." Or the bottle.

"Your family sucks," Pike responded.

"They are not my family," Harry snapped. "Their son died."

"I could do with a drink," Martinez agreed.

Harry waited by the floo for Pike and Martinez so they could go pre-game at Pike's house and change from their work clothes and then hit a bar.

"You waiting for me?" Riddle said with an insufferable smirk, stopping only when he was a breath away from full-body touching Harry.

Harry snorted, "Not everything is about you, Riddle."

"Where are you going?"

Harry raised an eyebrow. "What makes you think I'm going somewhere?"

Riddle huffed.

"Out drinking," Harry relented.

"*Potter!* Stop flirting. *Let's go.*"

"Wanker. Bye, Riddle," Harry said as he pushed from the wall and

followed Pike to the floo.

"So then he said it was a fucking team-building exercise that we were excluding them."

"Fuckers."

They ended on a small muggle bar near Pike's house. The inside was all panel wood, low lights, sticky tabletops, and cigar smoke. Harry didn't want Riddle crashing his party and he wouldn't put it past the man if Harry were in a Wizarding bar. He wanted to get drunk, talk, and not have to worry about the Wizarding World's most powerful man at his heels. Harry signaled for another round of shots. They tasted like shit and the smell almost made him gag.

"To not having those fuckers in our vacation," Harry raised his shot to a round of cheers and they all downed the shot with a grimace.

"Soooo," Pike started.

"Fuck. *No*. Please," Harry begged.

"What's up with you and Riddle?" Pike continued because he has never known mercy. "You were looking real cozy just then."

"Nothing is happening and nothing will happen," Harry said with more confidence than he felt.

Harry knew where this game was headed. Hell, he was an active and joyful participant in where it was headed. Soon enough they were going to have sex. Because he wanted it and Riddle wanted it, and there's going to be a conveniently placed bed nearby.

"You are both consenting adults," Martinez pointed out. Harry felt betrayed; Martinez was usually the voice of reason.

"What happened to Riddle being a terrible fuck?" Pike asked with a shit-eating grin.

"I stand by that. He's probably a terrible fuck." Harry downed half of his beer before reluctantly admitting, "But I still want to fuck him."

"Why don't you then? It's clear he's picking up what you are putting down."

"We're going to fuck it up. 100% sure," Harry started destroying the

label on his beer, "You think I can have a one-night stand," at Pike's loud snort, Harry amended, "or multiple one-night stands and then be like 'see ya, Riddle. Thanks for scratching that itch but I'm going to go be with someone with similar morals, values, and political inclination now'?"

"He'd kill you," Pike agreed. "Might still be worth it."

"He's better here," Martinez defended, but even he looked unsure.

"So I'd probably be charged with some fabricated crime and locked in Azkaban never to be seen again."

"We'd break you out," Pike cooed.

Harry clicked his beer bottle with Pike's. "Thanks, man. Love you too."

He had to do something soon because any moment now Harry was going to say fuck it and kiss that fucking smirk off of Riddle and not care about the consequences. Because Riddle was hot. And funny. And intelligent. And interesting. And fuck if men in power didn't do it for him.

But Riddle was also the unofficial Dictator of Wizarding Britain. And while Riddle had been careful to show him his best side up until now, he was also trying to seduce him. When the seducing was complete the other shoe will drop.

"What's the chance that you both act like normal people? You know the *used to know each other, had sex that one time and never spoke again because it was awkward* routine?" Pike asked.

"I don't know about Riddle but I can be the king of awkwardness."

"I can believe that."

"Fucker. I'll just start dating other people and move Riddle firmly in the flirty friends' category. There's less chance of having to move out of Britain in the middle of the night that way."

"Flirty friends' category?" Martinez asked with a judgmental eyebrow raise.

"Friends that sometimes harmlessly flirt with no intention of taking it further? It has to exist; there must be other poor souls that had a devastatingly handsome friend that they can't have sex with."

"You know me," Pike wiggled his eyebrows. Harry rolled his eyes and signaled for another round. He was going to get plastered.

## Chapter 5

The only reason that Harry rolled out of bed and dragged his corpse to work was the knowledge that Riddle was waiting for him with a cup of coffee and the *Harry* written from 8-9 am. He arrived just at eight with wrinkled clothes, the darkest pair of sunglasses he had and barely suppressed nausea from the floo.

Just as he expected, Riddle was waiting for him just off the main access with a hot cup of coffee in his hand. He smiled when he noticed Harry. And it was his actual genuine smile and not the politician smile. Harry almost felt guilty as to how close he came to taking a sick day.

"My savior," he whispered reverently to the coffee and let the dark, rich smell revive him.

Riddle laughed, "Nice to see you too, Potter. I'm glad to see how I'm your priority."

Harry looked at Riddle over the rim of his coffee and raised an eyebrow. "Don't fool yourself, Riddle. I only talk to you because of the coffee."

Riddle put his arm around his shoulder and dragged him closer. Harry huffed. The man was surprisingly tactile and Harry...well, he was a bit touch starved. "I'm well aware," Riddle drawled. "But also because of my charming personality, hmm?"

Harry took his sunglasses off to look him in the eyes, "You have the *worst* personality," he said seriously.

Riddle's loud laugh started a few passersby. They were still two hallways away from the cafeteria but he could already smell the food and it turned his stomach around.

"Let's go to my office. I'm not hungry today."

Riddle changed direction without a word. Harry was glad for the extra support and not having to watch out for people. Riddle cleared the way like Moses with water and Harry could safely concentrate on his coffee. Even if the stares that followed them were at times

uncomfortable. Harry opened his office door and activated the spell that runs the office on autopilot. He dimmed the lights, sat on top of his desk with his coffee carefully cradled, and closed his eyes in bliss.

Riddle looked around the small office in curiosity as the spell did its work. "An automated spell?"

Harry nodded with his eyes closed and enjoyed the coffee. "Adaptive. It has been learning for the past three years how to better efficiently do the work."

"You created an adaptive spell at...what, twenty-three?" Harry opened his eyes to see Riddle looking at him weirdly. "You could have won the Order of Merlin third class for that." It wouldn't be nearly as impressive if Riddle knew his real age.

"I don't like the attention." Which was true enough. And it would've meant having to actually work in some other office. The entire point of the spell was to not work.

"Clearly. Not even the prize money tempted you?"

"You have to go to a ceremony and a lot of activities afterward. I would have to spend practically all the prize money on a new wardrobe for all the events." Harry would know. It was a trap.

Riddle made a mocking sad face, "but I would have had you in my clutches much sooner."

"The *worst*," Harry repeated with an amused smile.

"So I'm paying you to study for your Masters?" Riddle said with a playful smile but Harry didn't like the implication that he was not working.

Harry's work has always been a point of pride. He hadn't particularly liked being an Auror but he had worked dammed hard to be the best Auror he could be. It probably came from not wanting people to think he got the job because he was the Boy-who-lived. And while this job was menial at best, he was the best menial worker that there was.

Harry opened his eyes and glared reproachably. "One, you are barely paying me. Two, you are paying me to efficiently do the job. That meant creating the spell and now supervising it."

Riddle raised an unimpressed eyebrow, "How much supervising does it



need?"

Harry sipped from his coffee. There was no good way of answering that. "It's been two years since its last mistake," he finally admitted, his pride for his work winning over admitting he was not actually needed here.

After a moment Riddle tightened his lips in displeasure. "You were shuffling papers the first time we talked."

Harry smiled impishly. "I wanted you gone."

Riddle narrowed his eyes and squared his shoulders. Harry knew him enough to know he was amused but trying to intimidate Harry into submission. It was *adorable* how Riddle still tried here and there to see if he got different results. He never got different results. But bless his heart; it was good to have dreams and goals. After a moment of watching Harry's delighted face, Riddle relented with a put-upon sigh.

"Are you always this straightforward?" he asked mulishly. Probably more annoyed at his failed experiment than at Harry's words.

"Only with you my dear," Harry said with a wink.

"If you are not needed here, come to my office, I have some things that might benefit from your eyes."

Without meaning to Harry yawned loudly. This was why workers were never too efficient with their work; they just got more work as gratitude.

"I have a chapter to read for my Masters."

Riddle looked fondly amused. "If you don't pass your practical exams with flying colors I'll eat my wand."

"That's a bold claim to make out of a Hogwart's dropout."

"Why did you leave after your OWLs?"

*Probably because I couldn't leave sooner*, he thought. He could see how Hogwarts without life and death every year wouldn't hold his attention. And he was born in a magical family so there wasn't even the newness of 'magic'.

"Hmm. This and that."

"If you are not going to tell me the least you can do is help me out for the day."

"That was weak," Harry accused. "You're not even *trying* today with your manipulations. I feel insulted. This lack of attention will make me leave with another dictator."

Riddle rolled his eyes but looked at him fondly amused. "There are no dictators in Britain," he denied weakly, and with a smile he added, "and if there were, you'd only have me."

"I could go international," Harry threatened.

Riddle narrowed his eyes. "Let's go to my office."

Harry sipped his coffee and tried to think about how to wiggle out of more work. He was curious about what Riddle wanted him to do but his eyes were closing with how tired he was. He had been looking forward to napping in his office. Hell, he only got out of bed with the promise of a short chat with Riddle and then sleeping in his office for the rest of the morning. But ultimately this was his boss and he needed the job for one more year.

"You have a sofa in your office?"

Riddle looked apprehensive but still answered, "I do."

"You get many visitors?"

"...Potter, we are *not* going to have sex in my office."

Harry's jaw dropped. He threw his head back and laughed. "Sex? I was thinking about taking a nap." A flush crept from Riddle's neck to his face. Harry watched its progress avidly.

Riddle cleared his throat. "A nap is fine." Riddle looked like he was a second away from apparating out to escape his blunder.

"So is there a no sex in the office rule?" Harry asked with a smirk because he still hasn't found a sleeping dragon he wouldn't poke.

"Uh." Riddle grimaced. "The door doesn't lock anymore...there were problems with other ministers."

*Not you?* Harry wanted to ask, but he bit his lip. Instead, he asked "Ah. So about that nap?"

"Half an hour, no more," Riddle said firmly as if he wasn't wildly glad they moved past the conversation.

"So bossy."

"I am your boss."

"Kinky." Harry folded out from his perch in the desk, dropped his now empty cup of coffee in the trash. "Fine, let's go."

Walking to the upper levels of the Ministry besides Riddle was uncomfortable. Riddle was treated with the kind of deferential treatment reserved for kings. People unironically bowed, moved out of the way, and opened doors for them.

It wasn't that Harry forgot that Riddle was the unofficial dictator of Wizarding Britain. They were just joking about it. But other than acknowledging he could get killed or sent to prison for pissing Riddle off, he ignored the connotations of it. Probably out of defense of his peace of mind and sanity. And because Riddle didn't throw his title at his face very often.

A lifetime of celebrity status had numbed Harry to many things. He was used to stares, whispers, and lack of privacy wherever he went. The last three years had been a rare treat but talking to Riddle every day had put him back in the spotlight and while he didn't like it, it was a familiar pain he could ignore. At the cafeteria, people looked and whispered but between the normal loud noises of the cafeteria and Riddle's demanding presence, it was easy to ignore.

But here it was impossible to ignore. Harry's hangover headache came back with a vengeance. He was glad that even at the peak of his popularity it never reached this.

The moment they reached the office Harry dropped into the large, leather couch, closed his eyes and was dead to the world. He woke only for a moment when the door opened and then when he heard whispered voices. He turned his back to the noise but he still heard Riddle say, "No, don't worry about it. Let him sleep."

He woke up an hour later with a big yawn and stretching like a cat. Riddle was working at his desk. Without a word, Harry left the office to find some coffee and returned with two cups from a small kitchenette down the hall. He put a cup of tea in front of Riddle and sank on Riddle's plush visitor chair. When he was halfway through his coffee he opened his eyes to see Riddle watching him.

"So, what do you need help with?"

Riddle pushed him a stack of files. Harry opened the first one to see that they were bills to be approved. "What do you need me to do with them?"

"Just to look at them. See if they need to be modified or if you find some important detail that might have been overlooked."

Harry hummed in understanding. He started with the first one. Riddle might not have known it but Harry had learned to do this sort of thing before. When the name Harry Potter had meant something and his backing of a bill could mean the difference between it passing or not.

The first one seemed innocent enough at first glance, something about building permits. Harry settled for a long, boring read. As he kept reading his frown got progressively darker. When he was done he threw it to the side in disgust and took the next file. After half an hour he threw that one too with a scuff and took the next one until he was done with the pile. They all had an insidious type of discrimination that was only evident in the details. He could wail and rant to Riddle on the injustice of it all. It was probably what Riddle expected. But Harry had a better idea.

He picked up the first one and searched for the economic impact section thinking he might have missed it on the first pass. It didn't have one. He checked the others. None of them had it. It was pretty obvious why. Harry's smile turned devilish. In politics, money speaks louder than human suffering.

He looked up to see that Riddle had been watching him. "Where's the library?" he asked innocently. He was going to bring the fucking house down. Something of his thoughts must have translated because Riddle smiled as he pointed to a door.

He hadn't done Predictive Economy in years. It's a branch of divination that includes statistics for predictive models of the future. If done well, it gave scarily accurate portrayals. Thankfully it wasn't too hard nor did it need much skill in divination. But he wasn't Hermione and he didn't have the rules memorized.

At the end of the day, Harry felt profound satisfaction. He had *destroyed* those bills. Absolutely annihilated them. They won't be able to revive them even with an hour of CPR and a phoenix crying desperately over the papers. He had made a detailed report on the impact of the individual bills on the Wizarding economy. How

(*gasp!*) even the upper class will see a fifteen percent drop in assets in the first ten years.

And made sure to include how the effects would ripple and still wreak havoc decades from now with disastrous effects. Then another report on how catastrophic all of them together would be (an almost twenty-five percent drop for the ultrarich in only twenty years!). There was no fucking way this was passing.

It had taken him the entire day but Harry left in a good mood.

The next morning Riddle did not mention anything about the bills during breakfast so Harry thought the matter was forgotten. Either Riddle would do something about it or he wouldn't. Harry had tried his best. The Wizarding World was better than it was in his dimension. It wasn't perfect, still as racist and classist as ever, but it was fine. And it wasn't Harry's place to "save it". He was over that shit.

It was as they were leaving that their routine changed. Riddle put an arm around him and changed direction to the upper floors.

"Where are we going?"

"To my office."

"Is the you-know-what still a rule?" Harry whispered jokingly.

Riddle sighed loudly as if he was deeply disappointed but Harry could see his ears turning red, "Regrettably."

"Then why are we going?"

"To work."

"My work is that way." Harry unnecessarily pointed in the opposite direction.

"You are working with me today."

Harry stopped. "Oh no. I have work to do, Riddle. My office needs me. It will burn without me there to supervise it." Riddle snorted but did not relent.

Harry changed tactics. "People will talk about how I'm skiving work. I'm going to get fired." Riddle laughed as if someone doing something in the Ministry without his approval was hilarious. It probably was.

"Congratulations, you've been promoted."

"I do not accept this promotion." Harry was not pouting. *He wasn't.*

Riddle tightened his arm as he looked at his petulant face. For a moment Harry thought Riddle was going to kiss him in the middle of the populated hall but the moment passed and they kept walking.

Riddle growled in annoyance. "You're being wasted in the communications department."

Harry huffed in protest. "I'll have you know, the communications department has never seen a better trainee in all its years. I have made a significant contribution to the functioning of my department."

"No one even *knows* there's a communications department. *I* didn't even know there was a communications department until half-way to my *second* term and even now I'm uncertain of its purpose."

"Exactly. No one knows it exists because for years it has been running smoothly. The messages reach their intended recipient even if they write a half-arsed direction or a fucking nickname. Do you know how many Mary's there are in the ministry? Thirty-seven. And most people only write *To Mary* with no department or even floor. How many complaints have you had with my department? *None*. I run a tight ship."

Riddle endured his rant with the patience of a well-seasoned politician. When Harry calmed down he only said, "It includes a pay raise."

And that was that.

Harry sighed in defeat. It's not like he could say no to more money. He was barely getting by and only because Martinez and Pike could loan him money in case of an emergency. "It better," Harry grouched. "I had a cushy job

"I'll make it worth it," Riddle whispered.

Harry shivered. Well, when he put it like that.

The promotion turned out to be Riddle's personal assistant. The post had to be made because no such job existed. He was now a salaried employee with no fixed hours. The wage was generous, especially for

a Hogwarts dropout but if divided by the actual hours' Riddle was making him work, it stopped being as generous of an offer. He had less time to study and was an indentured servant. Harry would have put more of a fuss if he wasn't chronically bored.

There was a knock on the door but since it wasn't his office and Riddle was out, Harry ignored it. He was reading on the couch with one foot dangling over the edge and the other bent as a prop for his file. Two empty cups of coffee and one half-forgotten cup of tea sat on the side table and a stack of files on the floor beside him. He had started on the guest chairs, but without a desk, it quickly became too uncomfortable and Riddle didn't want him taking the papers out of his office.

Riddle had Harry looking into some money mismanagement that was quickly turning out to be systemic corruption at all levels. The money trail even led to the current Minister of Magic. It was going to be dumpster fire and Harry couldn't wait.

When someone entered Harry assumed it was Riddle and didn't look up from the file he was studying.

"Potter," someone hissed. Harry looked up to see a blond he didn't recognize looking scandalized. "Yeah?" Harry asked uncertainly.

"Oh my god, get your feet off the couch and sit down properly! This is *Mr. Riddle's* office."

"Yeah, it is *his* office so why are you here giving instructions?" Harry snapped back.

"Don't you have any self-preservation *at all*?" The obvious answer was also the wrong one so Harry kept silent. "What are you even doing here? Don't you work moping up the floors or something?"

"Are you always like this or did I catch you on a particularly good day?" Harry snarked. Yeah, the blond was drop-dead gorgeous but if he kept running that mouth Harry will happily punch him.

"You didn't answer my question, what are you doing here? Get out! This is *Mr. Riddle's* office." *Did this person really believe he had sneaked here for shit and giggles?* Harry thought about it for a moment. *Well... fuck. With him, it was a possibility.*

"What's your name?" Harry was pretty sure this guy was a Malfoy. He had the same stuck-up mannerism and that extra something that made

Harry want to punch them. And there weren't that many blond prats in the Wizarding community that could enter in the highest office of the government.

The man's jaw hit the floor and his eyebrows reached his hairline. "Are you brain damaged?"

There was so much Harry could take. "Let me ask you a better question, do you want to get punched on the face?"

The blond studied his expression. "You *really* don't remember me?" he asked, looking shell-shocked.

Harry frowned. "Should I? Were we in the same year at Hogwarts?" Harry would have remembered a devastatingly handsome blond. Even one as annoying as this one.

The blond made a wounded noise. "I'm Draco. Draco Malfoy?"

"Huh." This Draco Malfoy was not his Draco Malfoy. This one was Lucius and Narcissa's best genes on steroids. He would have discovered he was bi much sooner if this had been his Draco. And also, RIP his Draco that never got the chance to be an annoyance here and presumably got dumped on a sock.

Harry got up in a fluid motion and tried for professionalism. "I'm Harry. Harry Potter. Mr. Riddle's new assistant."

"You are lying!" Draco hissed and Harry's jaw hurt from clenching his teeth. "I would know if Mr. Riddle had an assistant." Draco took him by the shoulder and was on his way to push Harry out of the door (not that Harry would let him) when Riddle opened the door.

Riddle's eyes immediately went from Harry's furious face to Draco and Draco's hand on Harry's shoulder. "Mr. Malfoy is there a reason you are manhandling my assistant?"

Draco dropped his hand as if it burned him. "No sir. Just saying hello to an old Hogwart's pal. Mr. Potter and I were in the same year. Congratulations on your new promotion Potter."

Harry slapped his hand on Draco's back with enough force to bowl him. He had to give credit to Malfoy; he didn't move an inch. "Thank you, old chum old pal."

"You must not have received my message, the meeting got canceled."



Harry sent Riddle a triumphant look that said 'you see? My office needs me'. Riddle glared at him and very clearly expressed that Harry wasn't going anywhere even if the communications department was on fire and Harry had the only functioning wand in the world.

Draco looked from Harry to Riddle and cleared his throat to interrupt the moment. "My apologies, I'll just leave then."

"Bye Draco!" Harry waved happily and Draco made a hilarious noise of protest.

"What was that?" Riddle asked when Draco left.

Harry dropped to the couch like a rock. "Reconnecting." Draco was a prat but Harry hadn't behaved top-notch either so he wouldn't throw the blond prat under the bus just yet. And when said bus could quite literally send you to prison on a whim, it was best not to. He'll get back at Malfoy later.

He waved at the files to redirect Riddle's attention, "You are not going to say I was involved with this right? I don't want to get murdered."

Riddle frowned. "What did you find?"

"Sit down. Get comfortable. This is a long saga."

Riddle sighed and looked at the clock. It was past six. "It's late and I'm hungry. Let's go eat."

## Chapter 6

"I thought you meant a restaurant," Harry remarked as they entered Riddle's living room.

"I thought you said you could get killed for this information?" Riddle immediately shot back.

"Point." Harry threw his jacket carelessly to a chair and moved to the kitchen. "What are we having?" he asked Riddle.

Riddle's kitchen was spacious and light with appliances fit for large gatherings. In front of the kitchen was a casual dining area with floor to ceilings windows overlooking an upscale commercial area in a lesser-known Wizarding area.

"Steak. How do you like yours?" Riddle shrugged off his outer robes and rolled his long-sleeves. He took out the already seasoned meat from the double-door fridge, turned on the stove, and started on the steak.

"Medium-well. What can I do to help?" Harry asked as he stood a bit awkwardly watching Riddle start to cook the steaks.

"You can just sit down on the island with a glass of wine and keep me company."

"Tempting. But I hate doing nothing."

"Maybe do a side dish for the steak then?"

"Okay. Do you have something planned?"

"Whatever you like."

Harry opened the fridge. It was full of vegetables, fruits, and *food*. It looked heavenly. Harry missed having an apartment with a functioning kitchen. Having to eat out all of his meals got old quickly and cafeteria food wasn't the best. He rummaged in the pantry before deciding on a rich, creamy pasta. It was quick, easy, and he has never managed to ruin it. He found what he needed and started the sauce.

"I didn't know you could do silent, wandless casting," Riddle

remarked.

"Hmm?" Harry asked distractedly, as he stirred the butter and added some flour and salt.

"Wandless. I didn't know you knew." Riddle looked pointedly at the flying cutlery and Harry's lack of wand.

Harry looked down and patted his pockets for his wand. Then he remembered, his wand was still in his jacket. He was unarmed and hadn't even noticed. And he had left his wand at the entrance without a moment's hesitation. Harry took a moment to process that. It really was New World, New Harry.

"Oh. Just parlor tricks," Harry responded when he remembered that Riddle had asked him about his wandless. *Didn't just about everyone did wandless in the kitchen?* Then again his view might be skewed by hanging around with war veterans, Ron that was a tactical genius, and the overall genius that was Hermione. Even Molly Weasley was something of an underrated powerhouse.

Riddle left the steaks cooking and went to the fridge to take out a bottle of red wine and served two glasses. "When did you learn?" he asked, giving Harry a glass of wine.

Harry concentrated on stirring milk on to the sauce and wished for a change of subject. He took a sip of wine to fortify himself and forged ahead because Riddle looked like he had no intention of dropping the subject. "I'm not sure actually."

"No?" Riddle asked with skepticism dripping from his tone.

Harry looked at Riddle and clearly repeated, "No."

"So did you just one day wake up and were suddenly capable of wandless magic?" he drawled mockingly.

Harry smirked. "Basically." When the pasta was done and he could leave the sauce simmering, he turned to see Riddle watching him. The steaks were done and he was waiting for Harry to finish with his glass of wine.

"I had an accident. I lost all of my memories." This was the sort of information that Harry preferred that Riddle found out through him and not Draco Malfoy blabbering.

Riddle frowned, "When was this?"

Harry took the sauce out of the heat and poured it over the pasta. "Three years ago." The steaks were done so he turned off the stove and flew everything to the table.

"I didn't know," Riddle said almost to himself as he sat down and served himself a steak. Harry divided the pasta and served a portion to Riddle.

"I'm not surprised," Harry shrugged, "It's not widely known information." He cut up the steak and tasted it. It was heavenly. He closed his eyes and enjoyed one of the few good meals he has had this year. Harry opened his eyes to see Riddle watching him seriously.

"What happened?"

"Traumatic brain injury that caused retrograde amnesia. I must have fallen or something; I don't remember. I just woke up on the floor of an apartment I didn't recognize with no memories."

"Retrograde amnesia?" Riddle asked for clarification on the medical term. Harry wished they didn't have to have this conversation. But it was better now by his own choosing and than in the future because Riddle was interrogating him when Harry failed to know a crucial part of his past.

"I can't remember things from before the accident but I retained skills and knowledge."

"You don't think it was an attack?" It didn't surprise Harry that Riddle would think of an attack. The man saw enemies in shadows.

Harry snorted. The idea of someone targeting Hogwarts dropout, communications department trainee Harry Potter was absurd. Harry looked up to see Riddle's serious face still waiting for an answer. "No, Riddle, I'm not important enough for someone to target me. And they would have tried again after seeing me alive."

"But what if it was your memories they were after?"

"Then we'll never know." Riddle looked vaguely worried so Harry clarified, "There was no doubt it was an accident." Or you know, a suicide. Riddle would know about it when he went looking for answers at St. Mungus but that was just not something Harry wanted to casually mention over dinner. It was private and Riddle was not

owed all of Harry's secrets.

Riddle looked pensive. "And what happened next?"

"St. Mungus. They told me the memories might come back with time but they haven't. And at this point, I'm rather hoping they won't."

"Why?"

"People who recover often don't remember having amnesia. While unlikely at this point, I could potentially lose these three years." Harry concentrated on eating but he could see Riddle was still thinking about it.

"You'd forget me?"

Harry smiled at Riddle, amused at his one-track mind, "I'm more worried about my almost completed Master's. It would be a shame to lose it," he teased Riddle, "but there's little to worry about. If it hasn't come back by now it's most likely permanent memory loss."

Riddle seemed to mull it over and Harry left him to continue his steak. He hoped Riddle found it in his heart to share the green grapes Harry saw in the fridge for dessert.

"Draco Malfoy today?"

Harry laughed. "That was a disaster. I knew Lucius Malfoy had a son named Draco but I didn't remember his face. I think I traumatized him. He's going to have a complex about being unmemorable."

Riddle smiled but it did not reach his eyes. He seemed in deep thought, probably reviewing his memories in light of the new information.

"What did you think the first time we talked?"

That was a broad question. Harry thought many things. Not all of them fit for casual conversation. "You told me upfront we had never talked," Harry ventured.

"I did, didn't I? And what would you have done if I hadn't?" he asked with curiosity.

Harry shrugged unconcerned, "What I do with everyone. Let them talk until they tell me what our relationship is like."

"Why not ask?" Riddle asked before taking a bite of his food.

"If I told people I don't remember they could rewrite history and I wouldn't have any way of knowing."

"That's true," Riddle murmured and concentrated eating with a thoughtful frown.

"And besides, memory loss is not cut and dried. There are things I never forgot. I usually know faces and names and have some basic inkling if I liked them or not. So I'm not as lost as I was today with Malfoy."

"It must have been difficult," he said after a while.

Harry chewed a bit more food as he thought about how to answer that. "It was...annoying," Harry finally settled on.

"Annoying?" Riddle asked dumbfounded with the beginnings of a smile.

"I mean, not knowing the big things of your life is terrifying of course but it was the little things that drove me insane."

"How so?"

"I didn't know where my key to Gringotts was or even if I had a Gringotts vault, where I put my wallet and my birth certificate, how much do I pay in rent and to whom do I pay it to, where I worked, what I worked in, the way home, or where to buy groceries. Am I deathly allergic to something? Do I need to take any medication? The everyday stuff you take for granted knowing."

"Why not ask your family?"

"It was common knowledge we were estranged."

"So you don't know what happened with your family? You don't remember?" Riddle asked for clarification.

Harry shook his head no. "I've pieced enough to have an idea of what happened but it's likely that I'll never know the details."

"Do you want me to find out what happened?"

"Thank you but no. It doesn't matter anymore."

"Can family abandoning you ever not matter?" Riddle asked quietly looking at Harry intently. Harry looked at him with surprise.

"What I mean is that the damage is done and knowing the details of why will not help me understand. I will never understand," Harry said thinking of not just the Potters' but on the scars that the Dursleys left on his soul that shaped him as an adult. To survive childhood he had to be pragmatic to the point of mercenary. Obsessively observant like his life depended on it because most days *it did*.

The corners of Riddle's mouth turned down. "Did you have anyone to help you?"

"I had Pike and Martinez."

"Picardos and George Martinez? Were you friends before?"

"They were at St. Mungus the day of my accident. They were cursed while on a job and we met at the cafeteria."

They finished eating and Riddle used his wand to get the dishes to wash themselves. Harry carried the piles of folders to the living room coffee table and started organizing them. Riddle brought the wine glasses and the half-finished bottle of wine and sat opposite of Harry.

Harry sat straight at Riddle's serious face. "If you ever need to know something, ask me. I'll find it," he offered. Harry nodded and the subject was dropped.

"Ok, let's start with October 4th."

Three hours later they were only halfway through the information and Harry was yawning every two sentences. His hair was a mess and he was heavily leaning into his hand. "I need coffee if we are staying up." Riddle looked like the fury was fueling him but Harry had no such emotion driving him.

Riddle looked at him and seemed to agree that Harry looked dead. "We'll continue tomorrow. Meet me here at eight."

"Here?" Harry confirmed.

"Yes. I don't want this information leaking out before I'm ready."

Harry nodded and started organizing the papers back into their files. He left with a "see you tomorrow" and passed out the moment his

head touched the pillow.

Harry woke up earlier than usual to have breakfast at a café down the street before floo-ing to Riddle's apartment at exactly eight. He spelled the ashes out with a negligent hand wave as he followed the noise to the kitchen.

"You want breakfast?" Riddle was dressed in grey sweatpants and a white t-shirt with his hair still wet from the shower. Harry took a moment to admire the view. Riddle exercised and it showed in his back and biceps.

"Oh, I already had breakfast," Harry answered as he hopped on the island stool.

Riddle frowned. "Without me?"

"I didn't want to assume," Harry said awkwardly.

Riddle grunted. "Next time you are having breakfast here."

Harry smiled. "Yes, sir."

Riddle rolled his eyes with exasperation. "Insolent." He poured over the boiling water into the french press to make coffee.

The french press was new and the bag of coffee grounds was unopened. Riddle didn't drink coffee. Only Harry drank coffee. Harry smiled as he watched as Riddle expertly make Harry a cup with the perfect amount of sugar Harry liked and passed it over. Harry wondered how long had the creep kept all he needed to make Harry coffee in his apartment. He probably didn't want to know.

"Thanks," Harry whispered over the coffee. He had a feeling that he would find all of his favorite breakfast foods in Riddle's fridge and pantry.

Harry got up with his coffee. "Come on we have two more years of financial documents to go over and I plan to leave at six." Riddle followed Harry to the dining table where the papers were waiting for them.

"Why at six?"

"Because that's when you stop paying me?" Harry replied dryly.



"Try again."

Well shit. This really was slavery. Harry expelled a noisy breath in resignation and explained. "I want to prepare for the trip."

Riddle frowned. It was obvious he hadn't expected that answer. "What do you need to prepare?"

"I was thinking of having a ritual prepared. Just in case we really find something Ummm *moving* down there. I don't want to go there wands blazing without being sure that what we find in there is really beyond saving. Since we don't know the original ritual, I was thinking of having a general undo ritual."

"There's no such thing," Riddle shot down instantly. "Each ritual has to be tailor-made to a specific circumstance."

"There's no such thing...yet," Harry corrected.

"How in the world would you go about doing that? It's impossible," Riddle scoffed.

"Don't be such a downer. It can be done if I want it done." That has been true all of Harry's life and he didn't see why it had to change now.

Riddle smiled widely, his crow feet making an appearance. "Are you going to stubborn your way through the rules of magic?"

"You bet your bubble butt I am," Harry said fiercely. Harry's jaw fell when his ears caught up to his mouth. He was mortified. Harry dropped his head into his hands.

Riddle seemed equally impressed at his balls, then he started laughing with a red flush creeping up his neck. When Riddle calmed down he said, "Then I'll return the favor and help you not get blown up."

Harry scoffed. "I won't get blown up. I have the beginnings of a plan."

"The beginnings of a plan?" Riddle repeated mockingly smiling wickedly. "That's exactly what I want to hear when talking about experimenting with volatile magic."

"Yes," Harry pushed through the sarcasm, his pride prickled. He wasn't an idiot. "I'm going to mix adaptive magic with ritual magic to create an adaptive ritual. It will learn each time it is used and will eventually

be able to create it's own solutions to problems."

"Oh joy, so we are mixing *two* volatile branches of magic and hoping for the best. And you expect this to be done before the trip?"

"Yes," Harry said stubbornly, daring Riddle to doubt him.

"We best get started then. We have to be over by six to attempt the impossible."

Harry deflated with the acceptance. He sipped his coffee and pointed at the papers, "What are you planning to do with this?"

Riddle hummed. "I'm still thinking about it."

"You planning on taking the Minister role again?" Harry asked curiously.

Riddle paused. "What makes you say that?" he asked carefully.

Harry rolled his eyes and gave the man an unimpressed look. "Give me a bit of credit, Riddle. You knew about this. Or had strong suspicions. You wouldn't drag this up if you didn't have some kind of plan for the aftermath."

Riddle raised his eyebrows. "What do you think my plan is?"

Harry shrugged and backtracked. "I haven't been paying much attention to politics in the last three years. I have been preoccupied with my problems."

"But you have a theory," Riddle insisted. Harry stared at the table and started reorganizing the papers. "Nope. No theory at all." Harry wanted to bang his head on the table. *Why did he start this conversation?*

"Come on, Potter, give me a bit of credit," he repeated mockingly.

"It could be way off the mark."

"I want to know."

"It's stupid," Harry insisted as he pushed the papers to Riddle in the blind hope that the subject would be dropped. Riddle put his elbows on his knees and stared at Harry intensely. Harry shifted in his seat nervously, "You are going to laugh. Politics is not really my thing."

"Tell me," Riddle ordered. Harry looked to the side, "Forget it. Let's work."

"*Potter*," he warned.

Harry sighed. "Are you going to kill me for saying this?"

"No, Potter." Harry reckons that was a solid *probably*.

"Not even if it is a wild, crazy story full of drama?" Better make him believe that even Harry didn't believe it.

"Not even then." Had Riddle always had prominent canines when he smiled and he is just now noticing?

"OK. So." Harry sighed heavily and pushed ahead because he already dug himself a grave, he might as well push the earth on top of him.

"There's a limit on how many times you can be reelected and you already reached your limit, right?"

"Right," Riddle confirmed, his eyes never leaving Harry.

"You could continue to rule behind the scenes as you have been but from what I've seen this new Minister is difficult and has been behind many bills you disapprove of. With this, there is enough evidence to throw him and all of his accomplices to jail. With the unrest, the public will be begging you to take the mantle again. You will deny the requests enough times to seem genuine while the Ministry burns in flames a while longer. When the public is demanding that you take the post, for the good of Wizarding Britain, you will change the law to set no limits on reelection and take the post."

"It really is a wild tale. You have a lot of imagination." Harry would believe him if Riddle wasn't looking at him like he wanted to wrap Harry up in a blanket and keep him locked in a basement somewhere secret. Harry laughed nervously and scratched the back of his neck. Fuck.

"Told you so. Completely off base," Harry said because as much as Pike and Martinez wanted to deny it, he did have survival instincts. He opened the file he had in front of him decidedly and cleared his throat. "Let's get to work."

By six-thirty, they had compiled files of evidence to present to the Aurors so they could take over the investigation. Chinese takeout littered the table and more than a few papers had greasy fingerprints.

Just six people had stolen more than 14 million Galleons over the last year.

Riddle was furious. "I did not realize it was this bad," Riddle admitted as he pushed his hair back in frustration and paced like a caged animal. He opened and closed his fists repeatedly.

Harry went to the fridge and got the green grapes. "Here, have some," he offered.

Riddle looked at the grapes then looked at Harry in exasperation. He smiled and obligingly took one. "If you wanted grapes you could have taken them you know."

Harry popped one to his mouth. "Me? no. This is for you. So you feel better. Sympathy grapes. See? you are smiling. They are working already."

"Anything else that works?" Riddle asked with a smile, taking another grape.

"Strawberries and ritual creation," Harry said with authority.

At midnight Harry threw the book to the floor and collapsed on the couch. The living room was filled with proto-rituals, papers, books, quills, and snacks. Harry had finished the grapes an hour ago. "I'm too dumb to be this ambitious," he complained as he popped another strawberry to his mouth.

"Well, too late to back out now. You have me convinced that this madness is possible." Riddle was like a mad man when he had a project. It would scare Harry if he weren't the same.

"I'll send some letters to leading experts tomorrow," Harry looked at the clock on the mantle and corrected, "or later today. Someone might give us a clue on how to continue."

"They could steal your idea," Riddle growled as if he was already planning their deaths for the slight.

Harry snorted. "They are fucking welcome to it if they think they can finish it. I want it done, I don't particularly care if I'm the one to do it."

Riddle blinked owlishly at him. "But they could win the order of Merlin with your idea."

"So I end up with the ritual I want *and* not having to go to a ceremony? Perfect."

"You are impossible."

"Impossibly tired," Harry looked around the mess of books he had brought from his home and various articles of clothing thrown around the living room. He wandlessly made a floating pile and headed to the floo.

"I'll pick up anything I forget tomorrow."

"You can leave your stuff here. We can continue tomorrow."

Harry dropped the pile without fanfare. "Fine." He almost burned himself in the floo and fell face-first to his mattress.

## Chapter 7

Harry entered the early-morning meeting with his second cup of coffee and Riddle's cup of tea when everyone was already seated. There were twelve high-backed office chairs in a large table and one smaller extra chair wedged beside Riddle and Draco Malfoy for him. He took his seat next to Riddle and placed the cup of tea in front of him. Draco reached over and took his coffee. "Thank you for the cup, Potter."

Harry sighed mournfully but let Malfoy have it without complaint. He wasn't going to be unprofessional at a meeting because Malfoy was an infant. Malfoy gave him a smug look as he sipped Harry's coffee mockingly. Harry settled on his seat with his notebook and quill and pretended to look marginally interested as the meeting started.

Malfoy's good mood quickly evaporated because for the entirety of the meeting Riddle relentlessly punished and berated him. It got to the point where Draco stopped reporting and let another person report because if Draco reported it, the job had to be done again. And Draco knew exactly who to blame if the glares he sent Harry were any indication.

"What did you get from the meeting?" Riddle asked when they were alone at the office.

"That you are savagely petty?" Harry responded without missing a beat. Riddle turned, surprised, and his face seemed to ask "really, Potter? *really*?" but his bad mood dissolved marginally and he smiled slightly.

"That's not exactly news for you," Riddle parried.

"It's not," Harry gave him a quicksilver smile but then frowned, "Mr. Fudge was looking particularly stressed. I wonder if someone leaked our investigation. Have you talked with someone about it?"

Riddle nodded. "This morning with the heads of Auror department and the bank so that they would get the ball rolling."

"You should up your security."

Riddle raised his eyebrows. "You think someone would attack me?"

Harry nodded. "With the information we have? For sure. It carries a maximum of twenty years in Azkaban. Desperate men do desperate things. A very regrettable accident might befall you."

"And what about you?"

"I'll also take preventive measures," Harry assured the man.

"I'll think about it. Anything else?"

"Yes," Harry smiled wickedly, "the esteemed Minister Scrimgeor is having an affair."

That seemed to take Riddle off-course. Harry hoped Riddle hadn't meant the highlights of the meeting because Harry had blacked out for a while there. His notes were full of doodles from the second half on.

"Scrimgeor is having an affair?" Riddle asked baffled. "How could you possibly tell from that meeting?"

"He passed by me on his way out. He smelled like one of my previous girlfriends. It's a pink floral smell that younger women prefer and decidedly not what Mrs. Scrimgeor would use."

That seemed to take Riddle even more off balance. "You had girlfriends?" he asked with surprise.

"Of course."

Riddle frowned. "I thought you liked men?"

"I do like men. But also women. Are we going for lunch now?"

"I have a lunch meeting at a restaurant. Do you want to come? It's a free lunch."

"Tempting, but no. I need to *not work* for an hour more than good food. Besides, it's Tuesday."

This time Riddle did smile. "What's on Tuesday's?" he asked.

"Treacle Tart of course. I'll see you at one to continue with the budget."

Riddle made a vague sounding noise and still seemed preoccupied

with the meeting. Harry left him to his thoughts.

Harry managed to get chicken *and* two pieces of treacle tart so he was feeling extra excited when he put his lunch down.

"How's the new work going?" Pike asked immediately.

"Love it. Already made my first archenemy."

"Who?" Martinez asked with a worried frown.

Harry smiled. "Draco Malfoy. We are rekindling our hate. He really adds a bit of necessary spicy to my life, you know? Also, I may need to stay at your house for a while. Only until an investigation blows over. People may or may not try to kill me for a while."

"So, back to normal?" Martinez asked with a chuckle.

"It's wonderful," Harry trilled.

"I'm glad you are happy...I guess?" Pike looked nervously at Martinez for some social cue. Martinez nodded and Pike smiled at Harry with more confidence.

"How was the date with the lovely Miss Liliana?" Harry asked Martinez. Martinez turned pink and started eating with more concentration than his sad salad deserved.

"He nailed it!" Pike crooned, slapping a hand to Martinez's back. To Harry, he said, "She was glowing today. They couldn't stop smiling at each other. It was stupidly sweet."

"Stop it you two!" Martinez growled at them but couldn't stop his smile for more than half a second.

Harry turned to Pike, "I'm staying at your house. No need to bother Martinez." Pike nodded excitedly over Martinez's protests.

Draco was adorable. Harry had no other words for it. His eyes sought Riddle to impart this important knowledge. Riddle's severe frown seemed to disagree. Undeterred Harry's eyes went back to Draco's adorableness. Riddle barked at Malfoy to leave already. Harry did his best not to coo at the red flush.

Since lunch, Draco had been trying his best to one-up Harry. But since



he had no idea what Riddle had Harry doing he's been stumbling along in the dark trying to be "more" helpful than Harry. The results were hilarious (for him; Riddle had no sense of humor).

Draco had come to the office and interrupted them no less than five times. Each time with a more feeble excuse and berating Harry for not having done it before. Draco had this idea that it was Harry's job to fetch things or organize meetings and granted that was a reasonable assumption when Harry's title was 'personal assistant'. But the work Riddle had him doing mandated that each time the door opened he had to cover everything. So Draco had made it increasingly difficult to do any work. Harry would be more annoyed if Draco wasn't like a petulant piranha that had smelled blood and wanted to destroy Harry but was trapped in a small bowl and could only gnaw at the crystal.

It was almost six when Draco opened the door one more time, this time with Lucius on tow to corral Riddle into a dinner that Harry was decidedly not being invited. Draco was the picture of a peacock, puffed and proud that his family was close enough with Riddle to invite him to dinner. He kept giving superior looks at Harry. Harry wanted to pinch his cheeks and say "nice try, buddy".

"I can't gentlemen, I have plans for tonight," Riddle tried to excuse himself.

"I thought we could discuss our strategy for when the investigation inevitably reaches the press."

Riddle's eyes met Harry in silent resignation and apology. "Do you wish to accompany us?"

"I'm sorry I did not include Mr. Potter on the reservation," Lucius interrupted. Draco sent Harry a victorious smile. So adorable.

Riddle glared warningly at Lucius. "That is an easy thing to change."

"Of course," Lucius immediately amended.

Behind the Malfoys' backs, Harry mouthed at Riddle *No fucking* way with a brilliant smile. Riddle narrowed his eyes and tried to force him with just his eyes. It was a look that could have melted lead. Harry winked. When the Malfoys turned to hear his response he gave them his most benign smile, "Don't worry about it, Mr. Riddle. I'm feeling a bit tired and I still have the letters to send."

Riddle took out his key chain and slipped one key off. He threw it to

Harry. "So you can pick your stuff from my apartment."

Draco's face drained of color and he looked a second away from fainting. Lucius looked like he swallowed a lemon. Riddle seemed to be fighting a tiny smirk. Probably aware of the shit-show he had unleashed.

"Sure," Harry responded with a laugh as he left the office. Best job ever.

"So let me see if I have this right. You've been to his house more than once and not had sex? Only honest to God worked?" Pike asked. They were walking side by side with still-warm churros from the corner store on their way to Pike's apartment. Harry had a bag of snacks they had bought for their impromptu movie night.

"That's correct," Harry said as he kicked a pebble with his trainers. It had rained an hour ago and the air was still fresh and humid. Harry had a windbreaker for the cold.

"Why?"

"I don't know man. He doesn't start anything, I don't start anything...We just work. And talk. We talk a lot."

"That's not like you. No offense Potter but you are kind of a hit and run."

"Offense taken. You know why I'm not doing relationships right now."

"Yeah yeah, I know. You want to travel as a Curse Breaker a year from now yada yada yada and long-distance relationships suck. So why aren't you doing your hit and run routine with Riddle?"

Harry sighed explosively. They turned a corner and headed towards Pike's apartment building. "That was the plan but now it's awkward. Well, more awkward. Before I had my office in the bowels of the ministry and we rarely crossed paths so it would have been a clean hit and run. Now it'd be messy as hell. And I'm liking my job. The pay is good. I might actually get to move to a halfway decent apartment."

"It was always going to be messy." Pike took his keys and opened the outer gate of the building. Pike lived on the fourth floor of a six-story building in a nice part of town. Not at all like Harry's fire-hazard of a building in the worst part of town. Last week someone had been killed

on the street and it took twelve hours for someone to come take the body. And that was with Harry bitching about it.

"Probably. But now that I know him more, I kind of don't want to do that to him? He kind of seems to genuinely like me and I would feel kind of an ass for using him like that."

"He'd also be using you. You know, as normal people do. Adults use other willing adults for sex."

"I guess. But it is the same? He might think it's the start of a relationship when I know it's casual and never going anywhere. It would have been easier if I had picked him up at a bar. No one expects anything from a one-night stand from a seedy bar," Harry grouched.

"One: rude. I met my wife at a seedy bar. And two: are you sure it's never going anywhere? You seem to like him too."

"Honestly? Not enough. I trust him but I'm still waiting for the other shoe to drop." For Riddle to betray that trust.

Pike huffed at that but he knew how hard it was for Harry to trust so he dropped it. "That hole in your face is for more than sucking dicks, you know. You can tell him it's casual and let him make the decision."

"How the fuck do you include that in conversation?" Harry complained as they climbed the stairs. "And do you say it before you start kissing or after? Because before is presumptuous. And stopping in the middle of a make-out to say 'oh, by the way, this is just sex right?' is fucking awkward. It's either a given and you made things awkward for no reason or the other person is devastated and trying to pretend not to be."

"Why do I fucking try? Don't have sex then. Let this opportunity pass you by."

"He gave me the key to his apartment so I could go while he's at dinner and pick up some books I left."

Pike gave him a wild-eyed look. "Wow."

"Yeah."

"Potter, forget what I said. Don't be a dick."

"It's even worse. I told him about the memory loss and the conversation ended with him offering all of his resources for any information I might want."

"Keep in your pants," Pike sang as he opened the front door of his apartment.

"At least Martinez is having luck," Harry said as he collapsed on the couch. Pike pushed him over to sit as he rummaged the bag for more churros.

"Martinez is ecstatic," Pike said around a big bite of the churro. "I cannot begin to explain how he is walking on clouds. I'm betting we are vacationing on the coast of Italy this winter to meet her parents and having a wedding next summer."

"I like Italy," Harry said as he finished his churro. A road trip along the coast of Italy with his best friends sounded a great way to spend Christmas. He'd probably be out of a job by then so he won't have to worry about vacations.

## Chapter 8

They went to sleep after the movie but Harry could feel Pike awake next to him an hour after they turned off the lights. Harry turned to look at Pike just barely visible with the light pouring from the window. Pike was staring at the ceiling. Harry poked him. Pike's blue eyes turned to him. "What is it?" Harry whispered.

Pike's jaw tensed. "It's nothing."

"Tell me."

"No."

"Why not?"

"You'll have nightmares." Harry swallowed. The hallways. His heartbeat increased. "Tell me," Harry insisted again. He was a Gryffindor damn it.

Pike breathed out deeply. "I've been thinking about something. It's a theory I have about the hallways," Pike started. Harry concentrated on breathing evenly, on the softness of the pillows, the heavy, warm feeling of the duvet on top of him, and his breath coming in cold and leaving warm on exhale.

"We had no physical body in the hallways. How could we? if we needed the bodies of our alternate selves to inhabit a new world. We must have left our bodies in our world. Only our souls traveled to the hallways. We could have never opened our door because our soulless bodies were dead and buried. That's why we never felt hunger, or tiredness, or anything really while we were there."

Harry felt the visceral reaction that always came with the subject. A rock settled on the pit of his stomach, cold sweat in his skin, and saliva pool in his mouth. He always hated thinking about that place. They stayed in silence for a few minutes. Harry concentrated on his breathing. Slow and steady. He was not going to make Pike ignore his pain to take care of him. He just needed to last a few more minutes. Breathe in *one, two, three*. Out *one, two, three*. He kept his eyes open because if he closed them he would see the rope, the doors, maybe even the pools of blood of the worlds he was murdered.

"I keep thinking of all the ways it could have gone wrong but miraculously didn't," Pike continued, "We stayed together. Can you imagine if we had decided to spread out before we knew they were endless? We wouldn't have found each other again. Or if I had decided to keep on looking for our world alone?"

"But we didn't," Harry said firmly. Breathe in *one, two, three*. Out *one, two, three*. Everything was fine. He was fine. No, he wasn't going to vomit. The feeling will pass. It always does. He just needed to *breathe*.

"No. We didn't. And we found a world that opened for the three of us. And to top that, out of all the possible worlds, we entered this world that turned out to be almost perfect. We are young, healthy, and happy. Well, happy-ish, you know? Considering everything. There were no wars, no senseless killings. We were so, so, so unbearably lucky... I have nightmares where we are not as lucky."

*Except we weren't so lucky*, Harry thought with a flash of anger, *we were the ones caught in the spell. We died*. It was the type of luck Harry was used to. Terrible things happen and he was "lucky" to survive with a new set of trauma to add to the collection. Pike turned to him, his hair reflecting the light from the window and eyes wide with fear. Harry counted five things he could see, four he could hear, three he could touch, two he could smell. What was one? Or had one been smell? Fuck he couldn't remember.

"It's just... I know this is the best outcome. *I know*. But, man," Pike tensed his jaw and blinked rapidly, he took a slow breath and continued, "I still miss them. It's been three years and I still feel like I'm going to open the door and my dog will come rushing and Cy will be on the sofa and it will be a normal day."

Harry swallowed. "I'm sorry."

"The fuck you are sorry for?" Pike said with a waver in his voice.

"I don't know," Harry said at a loss. He blinked away the tears. "I'm just sorry. I'm sorry this happened to us."

In the back of his mind, the part he usually ignored, he felt that he was somehow responsible. That this set of circumstances... this impossible death-defying miracle might not have happened were he not Master of Death. But that can of worms was one he was not prepared to open.

"Not your fault, idiot."

*Debatable.*

"If I ever see the son-of-a-bitch that this to us I'm going to prison. I don't care if the motherfucker is a baker in this dimension," Pike said harshly.

Harry felt the knot around his throat loosen and he even smiled a bit. "I'll break you out. We can live in the Caribbean. Drink piña coladas on the beach."

Pike sniffed and rubbed his face on the pillow.

"You are cleaning your snot on the pillow. Fucking gross," Harry complained.

"Fuck off, mate, it's my fucking pillow" Pike responded while he pushed his face deeper into his pillow. "Should have left you to sleep on the damn couch...We can do that now."

"Do what? I'm not sleeping on the damn couch. My legs don't fit."

"Piña coladas on the Caribbean," Pike clarified, the *stupid* implied.

Harry paused as his whole world broke and reformed. "Hey, Pike? Why *the fuck* aren't we in the Caribbean drinking piña coladas on the beach?"

"I don't know man. We poor as fuck?"

Harry snorted. "We could work at a bar by the beach?" That is usually how it went on the stories.

"Those things are seasonal," Pike reasoned. "What are we going to do when summer is over?"

"I don't know. We can figure it out. Where is your sense of adventure?" Harry cajoled.

"I like to eat and have a roof over my head. Besides, Martinez would never. We can't leave him."

"No," Harry agreed easily, "we can't leave him."

After several minutes of silence, Pike asked, "What is it? I can almost see the hamsters in your brain wheezing in the wheel."

"Is it horrible of me to be grateful that I'm here with you and

Martinez?" It was a selfish thought Harry had guarded jealously all these years. Even saying it out loud made him nauseous.

"Fuck, Potter, I wouldn't have survived without you two," Pike admitted with a tremulous smile.

Harry did in fact had nightmares that woke him covered in sweat and with a scream trapped in his throat. They ended having ice cream in boxers at four am ignoring how the spoon trembled in Harry's hand.

"Late night?" Riddle asked when they met at eight. Pike had left earlier and had left him to sleep in a few more minutes. Harry made sure to be dressed sharply (his best sweater) but there was no hiding the dark circles under his eyes, his pale face, and his mass of damp curls of a rushed morning.

Riddle in direct contrast was perfect. Harry took a moment to admire the probably custom-made three-piece suit with matching wizard robe in dark green and gold accents.

"You didn't pick up your stuff."

It took a moment for Harry's brain to process what that meant. The books. He had completely forgotten about that.

"No," Harry passed him the key as Riddle passed him the coffee. "I'll pass by today if you are at home. How was dinner?"

"Long," Riddle complained and started on his way to the cafeteria, "Breakfast?" he asked when Harry didn't follow.

Harry shook his head. "I ate so much pancake I'll probably skip lunch," Harry said. Pike was an early-riser and obligatory full breakfast type of person. Riddle pursed his lips and changed direction towards the office.

Riddle put his arm around his shoulders. It made him twitch but he accepted the gesture.

"I'm jealous. Whom did you have breakfast with?"

Harry patted his hand distractedly. "A friend. Besides, you don't eat breakfast most days."

"Just the same, I fought for that hour of breakfast. I don't want to lose it to some usurper."



Harry snorted and a yawn broke his face.

"What's on the agenda today?" Harry asked to change the subject. It was too early to deal with Riddle's fake bullshit. It's not as if Harry *actually* believed Riddle found their breakfast to be special. And they had work to do. Harry might not have wanted the job but now that it was his, his sense of pride did not let him do anything other than his best. Harry heard with half an ear to today's agenda while they walked towards Riddle's office.

They met with Bellatrix, Lucius, and Draco Malfoy on the way to the office and they fell into step with them. Once inside the office Lucius started on the updates into the criminal cases the Auror department had on the politicians involved in the money scheme. Harry calmly sipped his coffee while he watched Draco smile dreamily and giggle silently for the second time.

When the meeting was wrapping up and no one had mentioned Lil'Malfoy and what they were doing with his cursed ass, Harry interrupted. "Question!" All eyes turned to him, most in surprise. He was usually a silent shadow during meetings. With good reason, Harry was nobody in a room with the most powerful people in the country. "Why are we ignoring that Draco has been imperio'd?" As one, all eyes turned to Draco. Draco tried his best to blank his expression but his eyes were unfocused.

"Don't be ridiculous, Potter," Draco scoffed, "I'm a *Malfoy* and the best dueler in class if you remember correctly. No one would dare raise a wand against me," Draco said with only a mildly doped-up sneer. Impressive. The high of Imperio is difficult to control even if you were commanded to act normal.

"He looks the same as always," Bellatrix dismissed. Harry raised an eyebrow at the woman, but in the end, Harry shrugged and sipped from his coffee. He had a shit night and had negative fucks to give. He looked at Riddle to see what the man would do. Riddle met his eyes seriously. "Are you sure?" the man questioned.

Harry snorted. *Was he sure?* He turned his eyes to Draco's face and raised an eyebrow at Riddle. "Does he *look* normal to you?" By everyone's blank face...yes, Draco looked normal. "Well, maybe he's into drugs. The fuck do I know? I just met him." Harry ventured uncaringly. Lucius spluttered and his face turned red. "But yeah, most likely Imperio."

"Lucius take him to St. Mungus. A mind healer might tell us who was it and what they wanted."

Lucius's red face turned purple. "My son is not cursed," he hissed to Harry. Harry raised an eyebrow but stayed silent.

"Lucius," Riddle warned. Lucius blanched, took ahold of Draco's shoulder, and dragged him away.

"We might not even have to wait," Harry said.

"Why?"

"When they see Draco leaving the Ministry they'll target me next. The drop-out of Hogwarts and brand new assistant? I'm surprised I wasn't targeted first. Probably because you escorted me from the floo to here. Whatever they wanted Draco to do, I am probably in the position to do it. I'm immune to Imperio so I'll be able to tell you who is and what they want."

"*Imperio*," Bellatrix cast and Harry felt the happiness wash over him and a sudden urge to turn his wand to himself and *avada* himself.

"Fucking rude," Harry complained with a small frown thrown to Bellatrix as he sipped his coffee uncaringly.

She concentrated and poured more power into the spell. Harry shared an annoyed look with Riddle as if to say *you believe this shit?* But Riddle only looked amused. Harry rolled his eyes and waited it out.

Finally, Bellatrix lowered her wand. "Ah, so it's true. Had to make sure," she waved it away with a friendly smile. "Also, how in Morgana's tits are you immune to Imperio? I didn't even know that was possible."

Harry hummed as he thought about it. "Probably a combination of a contrarian personality, bone-deep distrust of authority, and feeling suspicious of any type of happiness because what the fuck is that, right?"

Happiness had been such a foreign concept when he had been first exposed to the curse as a teen that his mind went *wtg is this shit?* Perks of living with the Dursleys: immune to Imperio. Cons: a lifetime of trauma and seeking out toxic relationships like candy.

Bellatrix's face contorted as many thoughts flashed through her face

and finally settled in confused pity. "The Potters really did a number on you, huh?" Then she turned towards Riddle and bowed waist-deep. "My lord, I'll stay with you until the danger has passed."

Riddle nodded. Ugh, Death Eaters.

"So," Harry looked at his cheap wristwatch and ignored the creepy by-play. It was half-past eight. "To summarize, we have until six to find out who is trying to murder Riddle plus a full day's agenda."

"And you have to do Draco's work," Riddle added with a half-smile and taunting eyes. Harry made sure his deadpanned face transmitted his feelings about that. Riddle smirked, clearly enjoying provoking Harry. Fuck.

But, "Draco does *actual* work?" The disbelief oozed through his tone.

Bellatrix laughed and Riddle explained that Draco approved new projects. Harry nodded. "It's going to be tight but I believe in us." He clapped his hands. "Let's get to it. First stop: Auror department."

"Why until six?" Bellatrix wondered as he power walked to the door. *What? Why wouldn't it be until six? These people had no concept of work-life balance.*

"Because I have shit to do," he answered as he pushed the doors open. *Thesis projects don't fucking write themselves, do they?*

-0-

Riddle and Bellatrix were talking to Martinez and an 'elite' group (read: Death Eaters) while Harry complained to Pike by the donuts.

"So she told me I needed a lawyer and contracts in place *before* entering the cave. Can you believe that shit? Does she think I'm made of money?"

"Don't you also need...what is it called? The person that preserves ancient civilizations or something?"

"Yeah, I already have one of those. I expected that. Expensive as fuck but what am I going to do? But now she is dumping on me lawyers and museums and wanting me to change my hypothesis and fuck that noise. She ignored me for an entire year, dismissed my findings, called me crazy, and *now* that I proved I'm onto something she wants to fucking take over."

Pike made sympathetic noises. "Wait. Isn't she the one you had a crush on?"

"If you were wondering, that's why you don't have more friends. Why do you have to bring that up? So unnecessary. That was back in first year. When she was the sexy smart assistant professor. Now I have a deep well of resentment. She and her 6-inch red heels can go fuck themselves."

Pike hummed as he ate another donut. "But the trip is still on?" while still chewing half the donut.

Harry made a disgusted face but answered anyway, "Of course. I'm graduating this year and she'll have to suck a lemon. I'm not changing my hypothesis this late in the game."

"I can ask around to see if anyone knows a lawyer."

"Thanks, man. That would help since I still haven't finished the ritual I'm planning. And the harpy wants a '*professional*' to look over the ritual," Harry rolled his eyes in distaste, "like I'm a noobie that can't be trusted with a ritual. This is Master's level, they should trust us more."

Pike raised an eyebrow and smiled. "Still not finished with the ritual?"

Harry threw him a warning glare. "You don't know what the fuck you are doing," Pike guessed with a wolfish smile. Bastard.

Harry narrowed his eyes but then deflated. "Maybe," he confirmed grumpily. "But neither does she," he defended. The meeting seemed to be wrapping up so Harry turned to face Riddle.

"Harry, come here," Martinez asked. "This is Regulus Black, a class four operative."

Harry raised his brows and whistled. "Impressive. Harry Potter," he shook the man's hand. The man was tall with thick jet-black hair peppered with white that brushed his shoulders, the classic Black grey eyes, taller and leaner than Sirius.

"He will be on bodyguard duty. Black, Harry here has my full confidence. He'd be on par with a class five operative if he ever tried. If he tells you to call it, you call it, understood?"

Harry sent a warning glare at Martinez. *Thanks for making the guy hate me on the spot.* Regulus looked offended, not that Harry blamed him,

but gave a sharp nod.

"Do I wait for you by the floo?" Pike asked Harry as he walked with them to the exit.

"No. I have to stop by Riddle's house to get my stuff." He looked at Riddle for confirmation and the man nodded. He turned to Pike, "Curry for dinner?"

"You are having dinner at my house," Riddle interrupted putting a possessive hand on his shoulder. Harry threw his head back and laughed. Fake or no, playing with Riddle was a fun game.

"Am I?" Harry asked with a devious smile to Riddle and a wink to Pike.

"Yes," Riddle said looking at Pike seriously.

Pike waited until Harry confirmed with a nod before accepting the change of plans. By the looks of it, it did not win Pike any points with Riddle. "See you later, Potter. I'll make french toast for breakfast."

"Can you not provoke the actual overlord?" Martinez whispered angrily to Pike as they left.

"You have horrible taste in friends," Riddle grouched when they were halfway to the office. Bellatrix and Regulus Black followed behind in silence.

"I do," Harry agreed with a fond smile. Riddle searched his face, huffed, and smiled.

"You should have told me you needed a lawyer," Riddle commented.

Harry snorted in amusement. "Move over Aunt Petunia, Riddle here has antennas for ears."

Riddle frowned. "I could simply not give you that recommendation."

Harry laughed in delight but obediently backtracked. "I joke! I would kill for a recommendation."

Harry felt the faint click of a magical trap. He stopped walking and held Riddle by the elbow to stop him from walking ahead. "Call it, Black." Regulus and Bellatrix stepped in front of them and inspected the hallway. Regulus was already reporting it to the Auror department.

"Nice catch, Potter," Bellatrix praised after they inspected the trap.  
"How could you tell?"

"Come here," Harry called her to where he felt it first. Riddle and Black also paid attention while they waited for backup. "Feel this?" Harry took a step forward and back and Bellatrix imitated him. "like a faint click?"

Bellatrix had a look of concentration. "No," she said frustrated.

"It can be hard to detect. Here, I'll amplify it."

Bellatrix's face morphed into childish delight as she noticed it. She was the most expressive person Harry had ever met. It gave him whiplash her rapid change of emotions.

"It will be easier now for you to detect at normal amplitude."

Bellatrix concentrated as she walked a step forward and back over the imaginary line where the spell started a few times.

"It's really hard to tell even knowing it's there," she complained.

"It gets better with practice," Harry shrugged. After a lifetime of death threats that subtle click was as obvious to his nervous system as a gun cocking to a war veteran. A group of Aurors was almost at their location and Harry could see James Potter in the group. He scrunched his nose in distaste and got ready for an awkward no-confrontation where they both ignored each other.

Riddle searched his face and then at the approaching group.

"We can leave," he murmured. They only stayed a moment to explain the situation to the incoming Aurors and much to Harry's relief left quickly.

Riddle had a meeting in fifteen minutes so they headed there. At the center of the room was a large twenty-people table and in a corner, there was a table of carefully arranged refreshments. Harry discreetly walked around the perimeter of the office and found it safe. He didn't want to step on Black's toes so after checking the food for poison he sat out of the way with a plate of fruit. Harry decided to use the time to work through Draco's duties.

The folder he had been handed expanded to eye-watering proportions. Inside were store proposals to accept or deny. Huh. No wonder Diagon

Alley had the most boring pretentious stores and fifty of the same restaurants. Fucking Draco only accepted French or Italian restaurants.

Harry mentally cackled. Sex shop? Fucking approved. Hand-blown glass store? Yes, please. Another French restaurant? Denied. Hotel with discreet rooms for Werewolves to spend the full moon? ACCEPTED. Harry plowed through the files and by the end of the meeting he was done. The meeting had been something about Japan and Australia and a new proposal. Something really important and time-sensitive. He couldn't have told anyone the details even under the threat of death. Thankfully that wasn't part of his job. That he knew of anyway.

"I have to drop this at the central," he told Riddle intending to go on his own and meet with them later. It was a great chance to be Imperio'd and see what that had been about. But Riddle surprised him by wordlessly following him. After dropping the papers (and making it impossible for Draco to correct them) Harry saw Gretta near Riddle's office.

Harry turned to Regulus. "Call it, Black," he murmured to not alert the woman.

Regulus was instantly alert. "What do you see?"

Harry kept walking normally. "The woman in the blue cardigan, Gretta, lovely lady, but has no reason to be on this floor. She's a secretary on the first floor. Suspected Imperio or polyjuice."

"And if she's just dropping some papers?" Bellatrix questioned with a raised brow.

"Maybe," Harry conceded. "I would have allowed it any other day Riddle wasn't being relentlessly targeted."

Black was already reporting it on the two-way radio. Gretta passed them by and Regulus took her by the elbow and escorted her to, Harry assumed, the nearest Auror. As Riddle's bodyguard, Black couldn't leave his side for too long. Gretta started sobbing the second Black touched her. Polyjuice then. An Imperio victim would have been too happy to care they had committed a crime.

"Nice," Bellatrix complimented. Harry accepted her fist bump. Fist-bumping Bellatrix Lestrange. A true alternate dimension if there was ever one.

"We have to change office until the Aurors inspect what she did," Riddle commented. Harry groaned. He had left his stuff in the office and would now not be able to get them until Merlin knows when.

Lucius had come back to confirm that Draco had indeed been Imperio'd and it had been an assassination attempt. Draco did not see who did it as he was cursed from behind. He did not thank Harry. Harry did not need to be thanked but it would have been the polite thing to do. Two more meetings, a cyanide-laced spoon, and a rogue house-elf it was finally lunch. Harry stood up to make his way to the cafeteria with a breath of relief before he was unmercifully stopped.

"Potter, where are you going?" Lucius called him sharply making Riddle and Bellatrix look up from their papers.

"Lunch," Harry responded without stopping on his way to the door. The chicken damn it. *The chicken*. He would NOT eat cafeteria fish one more time.

"We are eating at The Mercy," Regulus responded.

"Great. Have fun."

"Wee Draco is not coming so there is a seat for you, Potter," Bellatrix said.

Harry turned to raise an eyebrow. "No."

"It is not optional, Potter," Malfoy barked.

"I'm not an Auror, just the assistant, and I'm confident you have it all handled," Harry argued with more anger than what he usually allowed himself while at work. The late-night and his nightmares were causing him to snap easily. He rubbed his forehead in an effort to calm himself.

Black *did not* have it all handled; he had checked the tea but not the teacup or the spoon and like any pureblood he ignored the elf. Black was probably the best dueler in the Auror Force but there have yet to be any dueling to be had. Not that Riddle couldn't take care of himself but Black was paid so that Riddle could do his job without interruptions. On the corner of his eye, he could see Riddle pinching the bridge of his nose in exasperation.

"Just offer him money," Riddle instructed Regulus. Harry perked up. Nice. He had a lawyer to pay.



"I won't accept anything less than a hundred galleons," Harry immediately parried. Regulus's face turned splotchy red in fury. Bellatrix gasped, her eyes bugged, and then she threw her head back and cackled.

Riddle stared Harry down. Harry raised both eyebrows and waited. He had decades of active force experience (and plenty of personal experience with assassination attempts). He knew what he was worth as a bodyguard. One hundred galleons for two hours was laughably cheap (not that anyone here would appreciate that). Regulus was good, but Harry was better.

Teenaged him would have balked at being "bought"... but teenage him also had a martyrdom problem because of low self-esteem and low confidence. Middle-aged him had bills to pay, an apartment that was a death trap, and countless hours of therapy working through the mess of his childhood.

"Fine. Let's go."

"Potter you either have balls of steel or a death wish," Bellatrix commented lightly.

"Changes by the day, love," Harry said with a wink. As Harry wanted, she threw her head back and laughed in pure delight. He could almost see why men fell in love with Bellatrix. Almost. Still too much like a squirrel in crack cocaine for his taste.

"Why are we going to level two?" Regulus asked him when he didn't change directions.

"We are taking their floo. Less chance of it being tampered."

"Head Auror Martinez is a hard man to impress," Regulus commented almost casually as they waited for the lift.

"Yeah, he's a hard ass," Harry agreed because he had almost hated Martinez at the start of his career but he was the reason Harry reached middle age. Martinez had polished Harry until he had no peers (and pushed him for mandatory therapy sessions for years until something eventually clicked and Harry admitted *yeah, that was fucked up and it fucked me up. Maybe my life is equally important as everyone else's life.*)

"I can see why he speaks highly of you," Black kept on.

Harry was surprised by the unexpected compliment and his anger

thawed. "Thanks, man. That's nice of you to say."

"Why aren't you in the force?"

Harry felt his posture stiffen. "Not interested."

"Why not?"

Harry was getting annoyed with the fishing for information. "Not my thing."

"You seem close with Head Auror Martinez."

Harry hummed and pushed the lift button for level two again. Finally, groaning and clanking the doors opened. He looked at Riddle for a distraction but the man seemed happy to let his bodyguard interrogate him.

"But you call him by their last name and they call you Potter more than not."

Pike had always been Pike. But Martinez had been *Head Auror Martinez* and Harry had been *Auror Potter* for decades before they got to the point of being friendly enough to drop the titles. Now calling him *George* was too strange to contemplate.

Harry hummed once more. Black could ask all he wanted but Harry was done with this impromptu interrogation.

"Is it not weird that a communication trainee is close to two of the best Aurors?"

Harry took out his blackberry and checked his messages. Pike and Martinez had both written to say they were working lunch. The ministry had horrible reception but it worked well enough to ignore Black. After one more question and two more prompts, Regulus got the message and finally shut up.

Harry managed to find Martinez and tell him he was going to lunch with the Death Eaters and sent a quick text to Pike before flooing to the restaurant with the rest of the party.

The restaurant was darkly elegant with tall ceilings, chandeliers that barely provided light and dark paneling. Severus Snape was waiting for them by the door with his customary sour expression and black attire.

"For your sake, Mr. Potter I hope you don't embarrass us," the man drawled. For whatever respect Harry still had of the man's counterpart, he refrained from commenting.

"I can take the kitchen," Harry immediately offered Black.

He had zero desire to be in a Death Eater meeting or worse...a work lunch.

"The kitchen is already taken care of," Black said, dashing his hopes of dipping out. But Pike was probably at the kitchen since he is the only Poison Specialist in the Auror force and also working lunch. So that was nice.

Harry opened his phone to confirm with Pike and ask Martinez the game plan. Martinez quickly responded with the number of the lead Auror in charge and Harry messaged her for details and to offer his services. The restaurant was crawling with security personnel with different designations and had been closed for their event.

"Potter, get off the damn phone," Snape whispered furiously. It took all of Harry's self-control to not tell the man to fuck off. When the Maitre d' directed them to their private room, Harry let the others walk so that he could put space between him and Snape. Merlin help the man if they were seated together because Harry was in no mood to passively accept abuse.

They entered the private room and to Harry's horror, it was a hellish combination of Death Eaters and politicians. Notable names like the Carrows, Avery, Dolohov, Lestrangle, Macnair are on their side of the "u" shaped table. To the right side was the Prime Minister of Australia with her entourage and to the left Emperor of Japan with his entourage. In total more than forty people and with more of a banquet feeling than a casual work lunch. No wonder this lunch had to happen even with the risk Riddle was currently facing. Harry cannot even begin to imagine the damage it would do to Riddle's reputation if anything happened. Maybe he should have paid attention to that meeting after all.

## Chapter 9

Harry rubbed his neck to relieve some of the tension. Fucking long day and it was just starting. Harry breathed deeply to calm his mind and put his feelings on the back burner. Game time, Potter. The last three years had dulled his edges but he was still *Harry Fucking Potter* and this lunch will go without a hitch or so Merlin help him.

Harry sat near the only door at the left side of the table and pretended he couldn't see Riddle signal him to sit near him and the Death Eaters' furious gaze. It left him in the center of a group of strangers but when the options were to the left of the Overlord in the worst strategist seat or the center of a group of strangers...well, not a hard choice.

His seatmates were not at all pleased with his intrusion and Harry sheepishly asked for forgiveness for imposing on the group and explained that he was an assistant that was going to be entering and exiting a lot. After his explanation, the air notably relaxed, and introductions were made followed by the normal get-to-know questions. As often as possible Harry turned the conversation to his seatmates, but it was inevitable that he had to answer probing questions and his seatmates were very interested in his Master's degree and the question he had been dreading... his thesis.

He tried to be vague about it because people tended to have *strong opinions* about Atlantis and it was tiring to field them but the group was relentless and Harry gave in to the inevitable. Then he found out that their enthusiasm for details was because the woman in front of him had a Doctorate in Magical Lost Cities.

Harry got...*distracted*. Mrs. Ito was a certified genius and was raking him over the coals in the nicest, most respectful way possible that still left him with a road rash. And Harry was living for it. So much so that it was the sound of insisting texts that finally dragged him out of the conversation.

The first message of BOMB Alert! certainly got his attention.

"Excuse me, duty calls," Harry excused himself immediately, already speed calling Martinez. "What do you mean we have no bomb expert?" Harry hissed when he was out of the room. "What about Johnson?" Harry pinched the bridge of his nose. "*What do you mean Johnson*

*works at the Quidditch store?"* Harry hissed. "Martinez, I haven't touched a fucking bomb in ten fucking years, and let me tell you it's not a fucking bicycle. *Fine.* I'm on my fucking way." At least Harry had the satisfaction of aggressively pushing the button to hang up.

Harry speed walked to the location, leaving the restaurant and going to the outer wall of the private room. Aurors and security were buzzing in the area but no one had dared approach the bomb yet. The lead Auror was screaming at the phone, presumably at Martinez, and in very explicit terms letting him know what a bad idea was to let the assistant, a former communications intern with no formal training, diffuse the bomb. Harry nodded along with her. Fucking bad idea. But he was reluctantly allowed to get close.

When he saw the bomb he sighed in relief. "*Thank fucking god.*" In his panic, he had forgotten they were in the past and the technology and magic were decades behind what he was used to. In less than a minute he had it under control. He called Martinez and told him where he could stuff a bomb next time.

He sat on his chair and proceeded to act as if he hadn't been seriously worried they were about to be blown up. Mrs. Ito welcomed him with a smile and pulled him into the conversation. She was interested in the recent Demon activity they had had and the discussion delved into demonology and theories about their origin. Harry was more than happy to listen and be wowed by her but this time he didn't forget his phone. When the message popped up from Pike to close and ward the door he saw it immediately. He quickly took out his pen and scratched a rune into his napkin. Not knowing how much time he had left, he discreetly threw the napkin to the door. Mrs. Ito gave him a long look.

"What type of assistant did you say you were?" she asked.

"I'm Mr. Riddle's assistant. My duties vary by day. Whatever he needs of me," he hedged. The napkin glowed for a few seconds meaning someone was trying to forcibly enter. After a few agonizing long seconds where he did not know if the rune would hold, the glowing stopped. Two eternal minutes later another message entered from the team leader, *safe*. Harry got up and picked up his napkin from the floor.

"Can I see that?" Mrs. Ito asked. Seeing no way to politely refuse Harry handed it over.

"Interesting design. Yours I assume?"

Harry's face spasmed as he yet again remembered that Johnson, the literal brains behind his brawn, the reason his half-baked plans worked, was not part of the force. He felt a stab of sympathy for Pike and Martinez. The force must be crippled without Johnson. No wonder Martinez was so desperate to have him back.

"A friend's," Harry responded. He got the feeling she didn't believe him and probed him. Without too much problem she managed to have him spilling his guts on his latest project. Harry had a moment of sanity as he was handing her a borrowed napkin with his as of yet unfinished "undo" ritual that this woman had him eating out the palm of her perfectly manicured hand and... he was fine with it.

He had to explain why he was sure the adaptive magic would work and was gently strong-armed to show her his former office with the hopefully still-working (he hadn't checked recently; it might have gained sentience and be trying to learn the cello for all he knew) adaptive spell. She asked for his pen and changed a few details before effortlessly adding a layer to the complex ritual.

Harry ooh'ed and ahh'ed as she explained her logic, completely absorbed with her as he tried to eat his lunch with his jaw still on the floor. As dessert arrived, a man two seats to his right addressed him for the first time, "You seem to be very knowledgeable in cutting edge magic, Mr. Potter. Do you know anything that could help particular diseases?"

Harry frowned. "Like what?"

"Cystic fibrosis for example." Conversation stopped on their side of the table as everyone turned to look at Harry. Harry's fork stopped mid-way to his mouth as he turned to look at the man. "Cystic fibrosis?" Harry confirmed if only to stall. He knew...but the year was 2007; it was decades before the spell had been invented after years of research and he couldn't be sure he remembered all the steps of the complex multi-layered spell.

Something in his face must have betrayed him. "You know," the woman accused quietly. The atmosphere turned chilly again. Harry hadn't noticed how relaxed everyone was until they weren't. Harry sighed and called himself an idiot in every language he knew (not many so the rant was over as soon as it started).

"A coffee please," he asked of a waiter. "Pass me the pen," he asked her. "I can't promise a lot, but I'll try." He played with the pen as he

tried to remember the steps. It had been front-page news in every paper for weeks as the discovery of the decade. He had seen it multiple times. Hermione had excitedly explained it ad nauseam. But did he remember? He wracked his brain and bit the end of the pen.

He started writing and sipping on his coffee when it arrived. Mrs. Ito watched the napkin with hawk-like intensity. After a minute he stopped because he couldn't remember the next part. She immediately suggested what could follow it. Harry was beyond impressed that she could divine it just from having the beginning.

Geniuses were going to genius, Harry supposed. It's not like his common ass brain would know. Harry nodded and added it. Her suggestion jogged more memories and he quickly wrote them before he forgot them but then...nothing. He didn't remember the last part. He drummed the pen against the table as he thought. "You got anything?" he asked Mrs. Ito.

She looked close to tears. The most emotion Harry had seen of her. "No...no, I don't know how to finish it. But it's something. It's close." And more quietly, "So close."

"Let me ask a friend." Harry took a photo with his phone and sent it to Pike and Martinez asking for the last part.

After less than a minute Martinez responded with a "you are a fucking fool, Potter" in all caps and the end of the spell. "My friend was nice enough to help," Harry said as he carefully added the end of the spell. She carefully picked the napkin and watched it with a fierce look before deliberately folding it and putting it in her purse.

"I wish to meet this friend of yours, *Harry*. You have both done me a great service." It was the first time she referred to him by his name.

Harry rubbed his neck, deeply uncomfortable with stealing someone's life-work and taking credit for it. "Don't mention it. It's not my work. I saw it somewhere and remembered."

From her face, he could tell that she did not believe him at all and this time was not even trying to hide it.

"How could I ever repay you?" she insisted.

"Seriously, *don't mention it*."

"Ah. I see."

Harry didn't know what she saw but hopefully, his undeserving face and name wouldn't be on tomorrow's front page. She took the napkin that had his "undo" ritual and also put it in her purse. "I'll work on this for you. I have a few...*associates*...that owe me some favors."

Harry was speechless. "That would be great, Mrs. Ito." "Call me Asami."

"But you don't have to. The help you have given me already has been invaluable."

"I insist."

Harry had nothing to say to that so he just accepted it. The lunch was finally over and Harry was free to get up along with everyone. Mrs. Ito asked him to escort her as they changed rooms to a more "informal" setting i.e. the same but standing and with free-flowing alcohol. Harry left Mrs. Ito with her group and made a beeline for the bar where Pike was expertly serving as a bartender along with five others. He was stopped on his way by Snape holding him by the elbow.

"You have disgraced us all with your shenanigans, Potter," the man hissed with fury. "Sitting with the Japanese entourage, boring them with your drivel, and writing on napkins like a barbarian. This might cost us months of work. I knew you couldn't be trusted to behave in a simple lunch."

Harry wanted to have a good relationship with the man. He really, *really* did. But it was easier to respect Severus Snape when the man was dead and Harry could selectively remember the parts of the man he liked. Harry breathed deeply, pushed the hand that was holding him, and walked away without a word.

"Was that Japan's Sorcerer Supreme you were chatting with?" Pike asked him when he sat at a booth in the bar.

"Who?"

"The drop-dead gorgeous bombshell that looks like she could stab you with her stiletto and gut you with her nails...yeah, Sorcerer Supreme. Once turned to dust an assistant that was bothering her. Or so the rumors say. What was she like?"

"Genius. Charming. Captivating."



"Genius like Hermione?" Pike asked as he passed him a generous portion of whiskey.

"No. As much as I love her, Hermione seems positively pedestrian in comparison." Harry smelled the whiskey and groaned. It smelled delicious. "I can't drink this. I'm standing only by the glory of coffee." He sadly pushed it away.

"Go to your boss. Someone unauthorized just gave him a champagne flute." Harry made a distressed sound at having to leave the comfort of the bar but stood up and went to his boss. He plucked the flute out of Riddle's fingers and passed him his whiskey without comment. Riddle only paused for a second in the conversation before smoothly continuing as if nothing had happened.

"Harry darling, there you are. I was just telling Akihito how impressed I was by you." Harry had a minor heart attack. Mrs. Ito was talking to the literal Emperor of Japan about him. And he wasn't even the boy-who-lived.

"Yes," the man to the right of the Emperor drawled. "You diffused a bomb, proved that Adaptive Magic was not only possible but currently in use, and casually provided a cure for a life-threatening disease by writing it in a napkin. Did I get all that right?"

"Also knows the location of Atlantis," Mrs. Ito supplied.

"Not to insult the Sorceress Supreme but it's a bit hard to believe, you understand? And a little ham-handed of you, Mr. Riddle. You are usually a bit more subtle on your machinations."

Harry cleared his throat. "To clarify, the cure was not my work."

"Harry, darling, I'd love to give credit to the creator. Tell me, if I were to announce a twenty million galleon price for whoever cures cystic fibrosis someone other than you and your friend would be able to provide me with a cure by the end of the month?"

Harry stayed quiet as everyone looked at him.

"How about forty million, hmm?" she pressed. "Fifty?"

Harry kept his sullen silence. Mrs. Ito had backed him into a corner and while he didn't want to take credit there was literally no one except him and Martinez that could provide the answer. In a few decades sure... but not today.

"Thought so, my dear. But don't worry, we will respect your desire for anonymity if that is what you wish."

"I'll leave you to your conversation," Harry excused himself wanting nothing more than to go back to the safety of the bar. He didn't even dare to look at Riddle. He was sure he wouldn't be in this position if he had sat beside the man like a good little follower.

"I think I fucked up," he told Pike the minute the man was free and able to chat at his side of the bar.

"That's...I was going to say unlike you but thought better of it. That's unfortunate. Why you think that?"

Harry sighed. "I don't even want to talk about it. I'm just...not a politician. How long is this thing going to last?" Harry asked, checking his wristwatch to see it was only two pm.

Pike looked at the wall clock above the bar, "The restaurant is reserved until five but it will likely fizzle out before that." Harry and Pike kept a casual conversation about the concert Pike was trying to convince him to go to. Pike talked as he cleaned the cups (testing for poison residues) and Harry watched the crowd for any signs of trouble. He kept in communication with the team leader about what was happening.

"We have to go to the concert, Potter," Pike was harping on him, not taking no for an answer. "It's their last one and I'm not missing the chance to see my favorite band live."

"Fine, fine," Harry relented as he texted back with an update on the suspicious activity. False alarm. "Buy the damn tickets. I'll...I don't know, build a time-turner to create more hours in the day," Harry snarked without heat.

"If going to a concert causes you to fail the semester you were already going to fail the semester."

Harry took his eyes off the phone to glare at Pike.

"Is this your friend, Harry?" Mrs. Ito asked as she approached them.

Harry immediately left his chair at the bar and offered it to Mrs. Ito. She sat like a queen and looked at him expectantly. "This is one of my friends, Picardos Abram, Auror and Poison Specialist. Pike this is Sorceress Supreme Asami Ito."

"It's a pleasure," Pike said from behind the bar, "Call me Pike."

"Asami, please," To Harry she said with a mischievous smile, "So you *do* know my title."

Harry winced and Pike snorted. "I was made aware a few minutes ago. I'm sorry for any unintentional disrespect."

"Nonsense darling. You have been a ray of light on this otherwise dreary affair."

Harry smiled at her. Happy to have made her happy. Pike served her a drink.

"You were sitting close together?" Pike asked with surprise. Pike had probably studied the seating arrangements as part of his preparation for the assignment. Harry should not have been close enough to talk.

Harry felt his face scrunch in distaste. "Our group was sitting too far away from the door," Harry complained. "Snape has already informed me and I quote I have disgraced them with my shenanigans and can't be trusted to behave in a simple lunch," Harry said with a roll of his eyes. Mrs. Ito watched his face with silent intensity.

"Aren't you worried about what Riddle is going to say?" Pike asked.

"Yeah, kinda worried about losing my job so soon," Harry sighed and made an oh well gesture. "To be honest, it is way more time-consuming than I would have liked."

"You are telling me Ex-Minister of Magic *Riddle* didn't sit you in front of me on purpose?" with a tone of voice that indicated how unlikely that was.

Harry snorted. "I wasn't even *invited*. The only reason I came was that Lucius Malfoy's son got sick this morning and they suddenly had an empty seat."

"And what else?" Pike asked. "What? Don't look at me that way. I know you *hate* lunch meetings."

"I demanded an outrageous amount of overtime pay," Harry said with a smile. "I was kind of hoping they would say no but alas they said yes and here I am because the lawyer I need is going to be expensive."

"Why do you need a lawyer, Harry?" Mrs. Ito inquired.

"For Atlantis expedition. It's in a finders keepers area under Magical law but I still need contracts with everyone in the group so that everyone is clear of what they are or are not gaining and absolve me of guilt if they die. That sort of thing."

"Harry, what does a Sorcerer Supreme have to do to be part of that expedition?"

Harry gaped. He felt like a fool. She had a doctorate in Lost Cities, *obviously* she wanted to go. It just never occurred to him. Because he was an idiot. Clearly. "Nothing," he said as quickly as his brain cells reorganized. "I would be honored to have you there and your input would be invaluable. I'll mail you the details when everything is confirmed. Are you reachable by owl?"

"You are such a dear, Harry," she said with what Harry could almost call fondness. "I'm not reachable by owl but I'll give you my assistant's name and she will make sure I get all of your mail."

She wrote him the information and turned to Pike, "Tell me about yourself...Pike." Pike needed no other invitation and without reserves started talking about everything remotely interesting in his life.

Harry reclined against the bar with his legs crossed as he observed the party. He snorted in amusement at Pike's joke while he texted about a possible assassination attempt on the Australian Prime Minister. Mrs. Ito made no secret of looking over his shoulder at what he was texting and looking over to the Australian Prime Minister to see what was happening. One of the Aurors close by quietly took the suspect for questioning.

"Tell me, do you have any interesting stories about Harry?"

Pike laughed with a decidedly evil edge. Harry gave him a warning glare. "No, no. None of that Harry, darling," she chided with good humor. "Let the man speak."

"Ok, ok. Let me think. Something innocent that won't cause Potter to murder me... ok, I got it! So this one time while on vacation Potter *purposely* let us get kidnapped because he found our abductor sexy and wanted to get her number."

"It was by *Arpa Adulyadej*," Harry stressed the name as if it explained everything. "Thailand's longest-reigning Dark Lady, it was almost an honor to be abducted. We got to see her house and basement. Impressive falls short. To be honest, it was the best part of our

vacation."

"Potter dated her even when she tried to trap us in the house and when that failed, burn our migration papers."

"The woman is a living legend," Harry defended. It didn't hurt that she had sexy older Wednesday Addams vibes. Harry's Mind Healer would have *words* with him if she knew this story. Words that Harry already knew but mostly ignored. Seeking emotionally unavailable partners because of childhood trauma of an emotionally unavailable caretaker. He was working on it, ok? His eyes went to Riddle where the man was coincidentally looking in his direction. Harry smiled and winked.

It was a slow process.

"You joke," Mrs. Ito accused with narrowed eyes.

"I wish. Not all of us enjoy getting kidnapped while on vacation."

Mrs. Ito took her phone from her purse. "So you don't have a problem if I call to ask her."

"Do it," Pike urged with a laugh and Harry shrugged, not caring either way. She put her phone in her ear and when someone picked it up on the other line she put it on speakerphone.

"Arpa love, I have a boy here that says he knows you."

"Hi baby girl," Harry said cheerfully, loud enough for it to be heard.

Silence. Then "*Harry*," Arpa purred. Mrs. Ito looked at the phone as it had betrayed her and immediately ended the call by closing the cover. She stayed quietly staring at her phone while she processed what had just happened. Pike kept randomly testing drinks that were going out and Harry was busy texting.

"That was one of your more innocent stories?" she asked flatly.

"Well, yeah. Nothing happened. We stayed for a bit and then when we got tired we dragged Potter out of there."

Mrs. Ito opened and closed her mouth several times, looked at her phone, looked at Pike, and looked at Harry.

Their moment of solitude ended when a group of Death Eaters approached them.

"Potter, I think you have done enough damage. How about you leave now, hmm?" Snape said.

Harry nodded to Snape, politely said his goodbyes to Mrs. Ito, and signaled to Pike to follow him.

"I'm fine here, Harry," Pike said as he stared down Snape with hostility.

"Pike," Harry said sharply. "Let's go for a smoke." After a second, Pike left the bar and followed Harry.

"You should have let me," Pike snarled. "He needs a lesson in humility."

"Yeah, and we need our jobs. Unless...?" Harry said with a smile.

Pike exhaled slowly as they made their way outside to meet up with Martinez. "Admit it, Potter, you just want to see me in a bikini."

Harry snorted. "That hairy ass? Hard pass."

They met with Martinez in the alleyway behind the restaurant.

"Potter, nice work with the bomb."

"Fuck you," Harry said as Pike passed him a cigarette and lighted his own.

"We have another problem," Martinez continued undeterred. "The water is murky. This is not passing the clam test."

"Ah." There was a traitor. Harry thought about his day as he pulled on the cigarette. "Are you going to try to smoke them out?" Harry asked as he considered and eliminated possible candidates until one shone like a star.

"I can't...unless you help."

Harry thought about it. "What kind of help?"

"Stay close to Riddle, make sure he survives."

Harry threw the almost complete cigarette to the floor and stepped on it. "It can't be tonight," Harry said. "I'm working on almost no sleep and I can't do an all-nighter."

Martinez and Pike looked at each other. "What?" Harry asked irritably.

"We have reason to believe Riddle might not survive the night if things continue as they are."

"Fuck," Harry swore. "I finally have a fucking dental plan. I was planning on searching for apartments next week. Fuck. I'll do it."

## Chapter 10.

"Get me a gun," he asked Martinez.

"What? Why?" Pike asked with a confused frown, the cigarette hanging limply from his hand.

"How do you kill a magical genius like Riddle? Either a cheap shot or you make damn sure he can't use his magic. And if Riddle can't use his magic, I sure as hell won't be able to use mine either. And I'm not trained for a physical fight." *In this body* went unsaid. "When I punched Charlie I felt like I needed to be hospitalized with a morphine drip for two days."

Pike rolled his eyes at his dramatics but Martinez nodded seriously and passed him his gun.

As soon as they returned to the party Harry glued himself to Riddle's side with renewed determination. He provides Riddle with drinks and food when needed and when not he made himself disappear in the background. Or at least, he tried. People still came to talk to him, especially the group from lunch. Harry found that odd but they had been a friendly bunch. Harry had forgotten almost all the names of his seatmates, but the man that had been sitting to his right and had not spoken a word with him approached him and not Riddle. Harry sent the man a confused look and looked in Riddle's direction in case the man was looking for Riddle.

"Mr. Potter," the man greeted. Harry smiled nervously. Fuck. More casual interactions for him to fuck up. "What do you think about the proposal?" Now he's really fucked.

Harry saw Riddle's eyes briefly go from him to the man and continue with the conversation he was having but with a small frown and tense shoulders. Harry imagined his future apartment with a fully functioning kitchen before opening his mouth.

"I'm a hundred percent behind it."

Riddle's frown disappeared like magic and his shoulders relaxed.

"Do you believe it has a fair distribution of responsibilities?"



*Maybe a balcony? Even a small one would be incredible.*

"Anything, in particular, you are concerned about?" Harry deflected. *Morning coffee on his own balcony.* The man responded with a series of clauses Harry had no hope of ever deciphering but he nodded along anyway.

"I understand your concerns, but don't you believe the future benefits would balance the temporary inequality?" Harry insisted, crossing his fingers that this proposal had any redeemable qualities. From what he had heard around the room, everyone thought it was trash and this was only a show to pretend they were considering it. The man hemmed and hawed but eventually admitted that there would be some benefits in the future but he was not willing to back the project in its current form.

"Can you write a counterproposal? As long as it's reasonable, I'll personally bring it to Mr. Riddle and advocate in favor of it."

When the man left Harry breathed out and relaxed. Riddle briefly squeezed his shoulder as he passed by. Yes, even Harry was impressed with his bullshitting abilities...which he will enjoy in his *new high-pressure shower with hot water and good quality soap.* Riddle changed groups and directed Harry with a hand between his shoulders to a man in particular while he went to talk to the Australian Prime Minister.

The man was both tall and broad with a well-trimmed, full beard. Harry only reached the man's shoulders and he was of average height. "Harry Potter, nice to meet you," Harry greeted. The bear-like man nodded, grunted, and kept nursing his drink in apathy.

Harry stood beside the man in awkward silence for a few minutes as he wracked his brain for something to talk about (that wasn't the proposal he knew nothing about). Come on, Potter. Think. He could have a *television*. He could come from work and watch movies. They could do game nights in his new apartment! When he saw the plastic wristband with the logo of Pike's favorite band he almost deflated in relief.

Small talk topic!

"You going to the concert?" Harry asked, nodding at the wristband when the man looked at Harry in confusion.

"You know them?" the man asked with a skeptical glance. The man

turned to look at him. Progress.

Harry nodded. "They are my best friend's favorite band. We are going to the concert they are having this weekend."

"I'd love to go but," the man grimaced, "I don't blend very well with muggles." That was weird. The man was big but not particularly strange-looking.

"You should," Harry insisted, "I heard it's their last concert."

"WHAT?"

Harry had the man's entire attention (and the attention of everyone nearby that had been startled by the man's exclamation).

"They have fifteen more concerts this year," the man rebuffed in anger. "And a world tour next year. They are stopping in Australia next July. I already asked for vacation for the entire month."

"No, man. This will be the last one. Insider information. The band is breaking up after."

*"Are you sure?"*

"Pretty sure, yeah. But who knows? They might work things out and stay together." This was another reality. Things might turn different here. Pike wasn't willing to take that chance.

The man mulled on that, "Did you buy your tickets yet?"

"Not yet," Harry responded. He had only just confirmed to Pike he was going. His poor thesis.

"How are you buying them?"

"Online."

"Is that with the com-pu-ters?"

Pureblood.

*His apartment could be on top of a cafe? He could go downstairs and buy coffee and pastries in the mornings.*

"Yeah. But you can buy them in person in Ticketmaster too."

"Is that a man that is Master of the Tickets or where muggles buy stuff?" he asked for clarification.

Harry scratched his forehead with the hand that still had his untouched champagne. He chanced a look at Riddle to make sure the man was still alive, he was, and that no one was trying to kill him, they were not.

"You know what..." This was a bad decision. But he was feeling sorry for the dude, "How about we buy yours when we buy ours. We are staying at a hotel for the weekend. The room has two beds, if you don't mind sharing a bed you can stay with us and we can dress you up so you don't stand out?" Harry offered tentatively, wanting to help but also hoping the man would say no. Pike was going to kill him.

"Why don't you just rent the whole floor?" he asked in confusion.

Ah.

Rich Pureblood.

Harry laughed at the man's genuine confusion. Only a rare breed of old money did not even know how to pretend normal "...because we are only three people and one room is fine."

"To clarify, we are not accepting this ridiculous proposal for a concert," the man said angrily but Harry could tell he was wavering. A part of him was considering it.

"But you are staying in the country until you decide, right?"

The bear-like man that Harry still didn't know the name nodded slowly.

Harry's smile turned mischievous. "Then wait until Monday to say no."

The man laughed. "I like you. Harry was it?"

Harry nodded, then asked, "What's your name?"

"You don't know?" the man asked with surprise.

*Fuck. Again? Another person he should know about? And what was it about these people's egos? Like everyone and their dog should know them. Fuck them. But that apartment...*

"emm. Sorry?" Harry apologized sheepishly. "I'm just a new assistant

and a last-minute addition."

Which reminded him...*ceilings that did not leak when the upstairs apartment flushed their toilet.*

"Hey, my boss is also a friend," stretching the word a bit there, "and he is going to the concert. I don't know if that will be awkward for you...?" Even if it was, Harry did not care. He was giving Riddle an entire weekend to convince this man to support the proposal. That had to be enough, right? And Pike was already going to kill him, might as well.

The man frowned. "Who's your boss?"

"Riddle."

"Riddle knows about the band?" Mr. Bear said with a mocking smile.

Harry did not blame him. Chances were that Riddle had never heard of the band or was in any way interested in going to a concert that was 80% drugs, 10% good music, 5% more drugs but blue, and 5% dancing high (see drugs).

The man called Riddle over and Harry started worrying if this was something Riddle even wanted. He looked at Riddle in panic and felt the man graze through his surface thoughts. Harry took the foreign (familiar) magic and pulled at it... Inadvertently creating a mental link (that shouldn't have been that easy to do...fuck... he had just wanted a more stable connection).

In the space of a blink of an eye, Riddle had the entire conversation and relevant knowledge of the plan. Harry could just about feel the unadulterated glee on the other side and that calmed his worries about this impromptu plan. He had no desire to search Riddle's pitch black ocean of thoughts but some things reached him anyway. Ew, Riddle thought in pictures. Harry's never-ending monologue is the only reason he was sane. He could bitch with himself.

"Secretary of Defense Alexander Walker," Riddle greeted politely, thankfully giving Harry a name and a title. He likely saw that Harry had no idea who he was talking with. "Harry," he said, putting a hand on Harry's shoulder. "How can I help you, Mr. Walker?"

Walker looked at Harry and his eyes said *'the gig is up, last chance to back out of that ridiculous lie.'* Harry stared back indifferently. *'Your funeral,'* the bear shrugged with a bit of malice in his eyes. "I'm told

you are going to a concert this weekend...?" Mr. Walker asked with no shortage of skepticism.

Riddle turned to Harry with a playful grin, "Harry, are you telling people of our weekend plans?"

It was Harry's turn to turn on the acting. Bashfully he said to Riddle, "I hope you don't mind, but I invited Mr. Walker. He's a fan and we heard this is probably their last concert." Harry ignored the *mirth-pride-joy-green eyes* that just about touched his senses.

"Not at all. We will be happy to host you, Alexander."

*Uff, informal. Bold.*

The mirth swelled like a balloon. Harry pushed it back. *Stay in your head, Riddle. It's crowded here already with me, myself, and I, and my friends Childhood Trauma, Mid-life crisis, and Fear of Never Being Loved.*

"I don't want to offend Mr. Riddle but it does not seem like your scene."

Since Riddle could only "hear" (see? Since Riddle only thought in images?) his superficial thoughts, Harry helpfully provided memories about Pike talking about the band. With this Riddle was able to regurgitate facts about the best album, the most underrated song, and what he thought on their atypical use of bells in their last album. It was funny to see Riddle talk passionately about this occult muggle rock band as if they were the Beatles.

The Secretary of Defense did not share the same opinions but he was listening intently and hotly arguing his points and that was a victory according to Riddle's stray thoughts. Mission Accomplished, Harry detangled his mind from Riddle's resisting one. He 'shooed' a few stranglers back. Seconds later he felt the full connection strong and healthy. He threw all of his impatience to Riddle's side. Finally, Riddle cut the connection. He still felt as if Riddle was just a hairbreadth away and the feeling never quite left.

Mrs. Ito and her party left with them at the end of lunch to see Harry's old office (which Harry forgotten he had offered; Riddle had not been happy). They left the group when it seemed obvious they had no intention of leaving Harry's office any time soon. Thankfully the spell was still working as intended with only minimal sass. Lucius had Mrs. Ito and her party sign some documents that Harry did not care to see closely. The rest of the day went by with only small tries at Riddle's

life. It felt like they were testing the waters. Searching for weaknesses almost methodically.

At six the workday was finally over but as tired as he was he had to make sure Riddle survived the night and having a strong suspicion on who it was...he had his work cut out for him. They had Scrimgeour, Fudge, and Dolores Umbridge detained as suspects but they were refusing to talk and there wasn't solid evidence linking them to trying to kill Riddle. Even if one or all of them had tried once or twice to kill Riddle due to the impending trial, Harry did not think they were the masterminds behind. They were more akin to opportunistic feeders. Taking advantage of the chaos and confusion to rid themselves of their biggest political enemy. Or at least that was Harry's assessment. He could be letting old ghosts dictate his feelings.

Harry left for the floo with Riddle. He had promised the man dinner.

*(Walking up a clean, quiet street with trees and kids playing. Opening a door, putting his keys on a key holder, opening the fridge for a beer, dropping on the couch after a long day, and turning the TV on to watch re-runs.)* He had not known how much he missed having a normal, functioning apartment until he let himself dream of the possibility. Now he was obsessed.

As expected from bodyguards, Black and Lestrage followed them to the floo. Black's face did a few acrobatics as he processed the information that Harry was going too. From surprise to suspicious, to sour. Bellatrix did not seem to care (or had already processed their unusual relationship). The moment the floo dropped him on Riddle's living room he went straight for the kitchen and the wine he knew was waiting for him in the fridge.

Riddle might be evil, but he balanced it out with being thoughtful. How terrifying that attention to detail must be when Riddle was your enemy. Harry had no intention of finding out. Riddle entered the kitchen and reclined against the wall near the door to watch him find the wine glasses. Black and Lestrage did not join them. And if that wasn't a clue, Riddle's blank face and tense shoulders spelled it out for him. Harry was already annoyed and the conversation hadn't started. Pre-annoyed? Ready to be annoyed?

"So. Care to tell me about today?"

"What about today?" He distracted himself by opening the bottle manually instead of using his wand to relieve some of his annoyance.

"You cured a relatively rare disease in the span of a lunch and casually handed it out like that was not our biggest leverage."

Harry took a long sip before opening his mouth hoping for a calm answer. *Hardwood floors, Harry. Think of the hardwood floors.* "I'm flattered that you think I can make up a cure on the spot, Riddle," he said sarcastically. It did not work.

"It is not as if I know what you are capable of because you hide in the shadows. For all I know, you ARE capable of inventing a bloody cure, writing it on a napkin, and passing it like candy," Riddle fumed and walked closer to the kitchen bar putting both of his hands flat on the counter.

Harry watched the hands for a moment and his eyes went up to Riddle's eyes. He wondered if it was on purpose. If Riddle was deliberately showing him his unarmed hands. He studied Riddle's eyes and figured that yeah, it was.

"I'm not hiding," Harry snapped with irritation. Riddle looked at him in exasperation. "I'm not! It's not hiding if there is no one looking. The simple fact is that no one is looking at what the dropout, loser Harry Potter is up to." *And I'm fine with that.*

"You were purposely making it out to look like there was nothing to see!" Riddle almost shouted. Harry looked at the door to the living room in worry.

"There is nothing to see," Harry hissed. "I have been working on my Masters and doing a job that kept the lights on like every goddamned person."

"And the adaptive spell? Did you just stumble into it too? Did another person invent it and you just happened to remember it?"

And that mocking tone of voice made Harry want to poke his eyes out.

"Well, that was different," Harry defended. "I had the time and motivation to work on it, didn't I? Is not like anyone enjoys doing mindless work."

Riddle passed his hand over his hair messing up the perfect coif in irritation. "Harry I'm not sure if you are a delusional genius or just plain delusional."

Harry breathed deeply and calmed himself. "Look, you are making it

more complicated than it needs to be. I have the occasional brilliant idea which I follow up with hard work. I also have no trouble asking for help from actual smart people." Harry pointed at Riddle with his overfilled wine glass. "Case in point."

"I don't understand, Harry. I really don't. You could have everything you ever wanted. Fame and fortune. Your parents would regret ever casting you out. But you decided to work in the Communications Department and live in a death trap. *I only met you by chance*. Because that day you decided to look for a second longer."

"Hey!" Harry exclaimed in annoyance, "I'm trying to move."

Riddle did not let him change the subject. "Help me understand. Please."

Harry sighed and opened the fridge. "What are we having for dinner?"

"Salmon."

Harry was glad he was facing the fridge so that Riddle did not see his grossed-out expression. Cafeteria fish had put him off any type of fish. He dutifully took out the fresh salmon from the fridge and started taking out what they needed for dinner.

Harry decided to humor Riddle's question. Not even sure why he wanted Riddle to understand. "Do you remember those plays at school where you could be anything? The protagonist, antagonist, side-kick maybe?"

Riddle nodded slowly as if he was unsure of where Harry was heading.

"Well, I chose to be backstage crew. Or a tree if a really needed to be on stage. Villager C, the one that has no lines or even a name and is just there to make the stage look full, you know?"

"*But why?*"

"We got one life, Riddle. And it goes by fast. I want to live a life that is doing what I want and not what other people want or expect. Yes, I could be doing more. I'm not *that* obtuse. But I don't want to. You know what I want? I want to finish my damn Masters before they add a new required class and go travel the world and see what's out there. I don't want stress, or pressure, or judgments."



"You are wasting your life," Riddle roared.

"Well, no one asked your opinion," Harry snapped. "You can sit with my parents and bitch about my life choices and have the same kind of relationship they have with me or you can back the fuck up and let me live my life."

They stared for a few seconds before Riddle sighed in defeat and grabbed a pan. Harry turned to look at the knock on the door. Black peaked in. "Can we come in now? It's not safe for you to be alone right now, sir."

Harry snorted at the irony and felt Riddle's mind brush his. He broke away immediately.

"Leave," Riddle snapped in anger. Black immediately closed the door and Riddle made a privacy bubble.

"Why does it feel so easy to reach your mind? It's like there was always this back door and now that I know it I can access it without even looking into your eyes. I'm pretty sure we don't even have to be in the same room."

"Hell if I know," Harry lied easily as he prepared the ingredients by hand.

"Why aren't you using wandless magic?"

"I don't know Riddle. It might be because a killer is after you and the chances they are watching us right now is high and maybe I don't want to give them more information they can use to plan, huh?"

Riddle walked around the island until he was beside Harry. "I'm sorry I said that. Don't be mad at me."

Harry stared unseeingly at the stove. "Are you really sorry?"

"I am." Riddle looked at the floor. "I can empathize with your parents. It is not something I ever thought to say. You have a lot of potential that you are not interested in pursuing. But...look how well that turned out for them. I don't want to push you away."

Harry mulled on that. "How are you going to make it up to me?"

Riddle looked from the floor to Harry with a calculating look. "What do you want?"

"Either you out of my brain permanently or your credit card." Harry had never seen anyone take out their credit card as fast.

"You are paying for this weekend and I don't want limits," Harry warned. He could at least make it up to Pike.

Riddle smiled and handed his credit card without hesitation. Harry plucked it out of his hand and put it in his wallet.

"Are we good?"

"Yeah."

"You still look irritated."

Harry sighed. "It'll pass. Just tired...and hungry... and pissed at you. I did not need this fight after this long ass day."

And the mind link was a stressful reminder of a past he'd rather forget. Pike was going to kill him. He unleashed a spell on this world that had no business being here for a few more decades. His thesis was unfinished and the clock was ticking. He had a few more assassination attempts to intercept and he was SO TIRED. God, he wanted to nap.

Riddle opened the fridge and rummaged until he found green grapes.

"I have it on good authority that they help," Riddle said as he offered the bag. Harry punched Riddle's shoulder (still a bit pissed), smiled, and accepted the bag. Riddle might not be perfect (far from it), but he listened.

Not long after, Riddle let Bellatrix and Regulus in the kitchen where they sat on the kitchen table and watched them cook. Harry concentrated on what he was doing and carefully avoided any use of wandless magic (harder than it looks). The pan sizzled as he caramelized the onions. He added the salmon and turned down the heat and covered it. He checked the mashed potatoes while he waited and added more salt.

"Did you really disable the bomb?" Riddle asked quietly as he checked the vegetables.

"The most useful skill that you'll never need."

"Almost never," Riddle corrected.

Harry felt it before he saw it. It felt like a current through his nervous

system as the antiapparation ward wrapped around them. He stilled and slowly turned the stove off.

"What's wrong?" Riddle asked with a frown at the still raw salmon.

"Do you have your wand?" Harry asked in a low whisper as took out his own. As always, the threat of violence caused something to switch in his brain and a deadly sort of calm to descend. His focus sharpened and the noise was turned down. He didn't hear the conversation the others were having as he focused his attention on what was coming.

Harry breathed deeply and when the windows and doors exploded and people flooded in he let it out carefully. His hands shook with adrenaline but he carefully leaned back against the stove and did nothing as the fight started. This wasn't his fight. He wasn't an Auror. And Riddle, Black, and Lestrage were more than enough.

He watched the fight from his post against the stove. Riddle stepped in front of him and diverted spells that went Harry's way. Harry only watched. It was difficult. He wanted to fight and it tested his patience to stand back and do nothing. Six assailants against three might seem uneven but the fight was over fast without Harry raising a finger. Riddle was...like a tank. Deadly and unbreachable. Three fell like flies in seconds. His form perfect. His magic... breathtaking.

*And no.*

*No, he was not attracted to Riddle killing in cold blood.*

*He was not.*

*Ew, right?*

*Right.*

Those drops of blood on Riddle's face were not captivating him. Especially not the one on his neck that is slowly rolling down and staining his white shirt. And that smile. Like a hunter savoring the thrill of a good hunt. That show of strength was not sexy. Not at all. Harry is disgusted at the violence. Or when Riddle used his body as a shield when a spell went in Harry's direction. Normal people don't find that arousing.

He takes out his phone to check if he still has his Mind Healer's number. Oh good, he has it. He should make an emergency appointment.

He makes the mistake of looking up from his phone. Riddle was taking his shirt off and using it to wipe the blood from his face. Harry bit his lower lip as his eyes go slowly from the sharp V of his hips, perfectly defined abs, pecs, and shoulders.

He needs Jesus is what he needs. A priest to pray over his soul. Harry lowers his face and puts it between his arms and closes his eyes.

"You good Harry?" Riddle asked as he came over and put a hand on his shoulder. Harry did his best to not let his eyes stray over the man's clavicles.

"Yeah," he croaked, not sounding good at all.

## Chapter 11

Ten minutes and a moral crisis later the Aurors filter in and Harry starts to prepare tea for everyone like a good, nice, normal assistant. Martinez takes a look at the scene and immediately goes to Harry at his permanent post by the stove.

"Did you do anything?" *Is there any evidence I need to heavily edit to not involve you in this?*

"Did not raise my wand," Harry assured the man. At Martinez *don't bullshit me* look and *this is serious* frown, Harry raised his hands in mock surrender. "Not one spell. Not one of my fingers twitched. Stayed right here, did not move, not even to duck a spell, did not talk."

"Harry hates fish," Pike said unprompted as he nosily uncovered the forgotten pans with dinner.

Harry turned a death glare at Pike. Riddle turned from a conversation with an Auror to look first at Pike and then at Harry with a frown.

"Fuck damn it Pike. What the fuck are you even doing here? This has nothing to do with poison."

"You don't like salmon?" Riddle asked with noticeable displeasure disregarding his previous conversation. The senior Auror did not look happy that his questions were not being taken with the proper gravitas.

"Ignore him. Salmon is fine."

"Hates it," Pike repeated, to Harry he asked, "Want me to bring you tacos from the food truck on the corner?"

"Ah," Harry hesitated with a nervous look at Riddle. "The one near the 24hour pharmacy?"

"Where else? They are the only tacos worth having."

Harry's inner Petunia screamed at him that it was impolite to reject a dinner made for him even if the thought of fish repulsed him. "No. It's fine."

"I'm going anyway. I'm not working tonight so I can get dinner for me and Martinez."

"Well...if you are going," Harry caved like a badly placed house of cards. "Bring me five meat, with crisps, extra spicy, with the stringy thing on top. You know the thing, right? The crispy stuff."

"Yeah, yeah, I know."

Belatedly, he remembered that Riddle was right there, listening, still heavily frowning. "You want some Mr. Riddle?" It was always Mr. Riddle while in the company of others, and Riddle when alone. "It's going to be a long night and the salmon is probably ruined with blood."

The salmon was decidedly not ruined by blood because Harry had put the lid over it and the whole ordeal had been done and over in minutes. But there had been blood near it, it was probably unsanitary. So...tacos? Riddle was not amused and did not want tacos. Whenever he wasn't being interviewed, he was frowning at Harry. Harry made himself busy by making more tea and being blind to Tom Riddle-shaped objects.

While waiting for the tacos, they were interviewed, the bodies removed and the apartment put to rights. Harry was playfully ribbed by the Aurors about his lack of participation and that his last fifty spells were mostly for copying and stapling papers. (Harry had been an auror, he knew how and when to clean his wand of all the "above his station" spells).

Riddle had been a dark shadow over his shoulder as the spells kept coming as stapling spells when Harry had done no stapling all day. Harry cheerfully ignored him because no, he was not hiding...just not looking for an in-depth case review by the Auror Department about how he knows what he knows, where he learned it, and who taught him. He had been an Auror, so he knew that a layperson who did the spells he does raises all sorts of red flags and pointed questions. He just wanted everyone to avoid the headache and the extra paperwork. Especially for Martinez and Pike which then have to use their pull inside the department to make it all quietly go away. (Like they have done on occasion)

The smart cookies in the Auror Department declared that Riddle was now safe. The killers were dead and he could stay in his home without the need for bodyguards. (What in the incompetent hell had the Auror

department turned into? Martinez's blood pressure had to be through the roof). This was clearly the decoy to bring their guard down and they had fallen into it like fist class amateurs.

"Who is in charge of this case?" he asked Pike with a mouth full of taco.

"James Potter."

"The fuck?" Half his taco slid off to his plate. "He's not even here," Harry complained as he sucked his greasy fingers before scooping the innards of his taco and putting them in their rightful place.

Pike passed him the crisps that shone with grease and were speckled with spice.

"His lackeys are keeping him up to date by owl because it's one of his kids' birthday," Pike explained.

"An attempt against the highest power in the country in his own home and he couldn't be assed to be here?" In his time as an Auror that wouldn't be accepted even if it was your own mother's funeral that day. No wonder Martinez and Pike didn't feel safe leaving Riddle alone for the night.

"I know. Peace times, man. Things are so relaxed. Martinez might retire early. That's how much he hates it."

"For his heart, I hope he does. I'm glad I retired."

"I still like it, for all the bullshit there is. Where else would I get my laughs?"

Auror work was not as glamorous as people made it out to be. Dark Wizards generally went about their lives without making much of a fuss. Maybe once a year, at most, a dark wizard would do something worthy of Aurors being called. The rest of the time it was ordinary wizards and witches getting into unusual circumstances and often because of sex, love, and jealousy. Hogwarts did a piss poor job of preparing him for the real world.

"And you inserted your wand *where*?" Harry joked in fond remembrance at one of the most popular questions as an Auror.

Pike cleared his voice and adopted a serious tone, "To recap, you and your partner decided to have sex on top of the boiling potion to get

high on the fumes, is that correct? And *then* he fell and died?"

Harry laughed and leaned forward so that only Pike could hear him and adopted his most professional voice, "To clarify Mrs. Fisher, your husband's partial human-to-octopus transfiguration was on purpose?... And you wanted to do *what* with those tentacles?"

Pike exploded laughing, dropping back on the chair and almost dropping his plate. Harry grabbed it before it hit the floor. He had been so innocent when he first started the job. So naive. A precious baby. He quickly learned to control his facial expression while on the job.

Martinez turned to frown at them disapprovingly. Both of them ignored him. Pike wasn't working and Harry was happily retired and living his golden years with new knees. Riddle on the other hand looked like he was John Wick and they had killed his dog. Harry silently offered crisps from his plate which he thought was a sufficient apology for laughing out loud on a crime scene. Riddle did not accept and kept acting like the human form of darkness.

"What bit his ass?" Harry complained to Pike. The whole room was walking on eggshells around the man.

Pike looked at him long and hard. "Potter, you are one dumb motherfucker. Thank god you are pretty."

"You think I'm pretty?" Harry asked loudly just to be an ass before exploding in cackles.

"Who thinks you are pretty, Potter?" Someone shouted from the other side of the room.

"Pike," Harry shouted back. Pike hid his face in his hands and groaned as a loud debate on Harry's prettiness started that Martinez promptly shut off but not before frowning at the Auror that said that Harry was average at best.

Harry was considering whether he really should eat that fifth taco or not since he was full. He decided he should. No sense in wasting good food.

"Potter, aren't you leaving?" Regulus Black asked when the interviews were over and the Auror's were packing up. Everyone not so subtly stopped and listened to what Harry had to say.



"Nop. I still have some papers to finish up and Mr. Riddle wants them done by tonight."

He got a few sympathetic pats on the back, and "man that's rough," and "after what you witnessed? You should be able to take a day off at least."

He felt Riddle's mind at the blatant lie and he easily shared his monologue-like thoughts on the incompetency of the Auror Department, their mismanagement of this case, part of the conversation with Pike and Martinez (heavily edited to just include the possibility of an inside job), and a few *lively* words on the likelihood of James Potter's theory of this being the end of the assassination attempts.

Riddle showed him an avalanche of images that Harry had no hope of ever deciphering. Individually yes, he could see familiar things but what they meant as a conversation? no. Harry shook off Riddle off his mind to avoid the migraine. Thankfully the connection was getting weaker as Harry wasn't feeding it and it had only been superficial at best. Nothing like it was when it was Voldemort, not that Riddle had anything to compare it to. This is more akin to talking on the phone through a private line and with Voldemort it had been two bodies sharing one mixed soul.

The Aurors, Martinez, and Pike left and only Riddle's inner circle stayed in the kitchen for a "meeting". Harry used the time to nap sitting on the living room couch. He hadn't planned on napping but the moment he was alone and without distractions he crashed. Riddle was probably safe within such a large group. When the screams started he opened one eye and raised his head from the sofa to check if Riddle was fine. Riddle was fine so Harry went back to sleep and ignored the screams that were soon cut off when a sound dampening bubble was cast. He was woken up as people milled the living room to use the floo.

"Still staying?" *After that?* Black asked with a raised eyebrow. Harry yawned and nodded.

"Things to do."

"I'm sure you have things to do tonight," Lestrangle leered. Harry let it slide. It was a good alibi as any.

Riddle hesitated at the entrance of the living room after everyone left. Carefully he approached Harry. Harry raised an eyebrow in silent

question at the odd behavior and defensive positioning. Like Riddle was expecting a hit and bracing himself. Shoulders tight, hands clasped behind his back, blank face. "Are we good?"

Harry frowned. *Why was he asking...?* Then Harry realized. "I'm sorry about not telling you about the salmon. I can eat it, but I don't love it," Or like it. Fine, he hated it. "I should've told you."

Riddle's face showed confusion for a moment before clearing it. With renewed confidence, Riddle approached the couch and sat a careful distance beside Harry.

"Yes, you should have. But I also should've realized. You've told me enough times about going late to lunch and the reason. I just...wasn't paying attention."

Harry closed his eyes again now that the problem was solved and relaxed against the sinfully soft couch. "You don't pay attention because you don't eat unless you are close to starvation. And even then you try to tea it away first."

"...so you are fine? Everything is fine?"

Harry opened his eyes and turned to Riddle at the odd insistence. "Well, it's going to be better once this whole," Harry made vague gestures encompassing Riddle's assassination attempts, "thing is done and over. I need time to finish my thesis and this is seriously eating my time."

Harry will make damn sure no other assassin makes it this close to Riddle ever again. He'll just quietly solve the problem with no one the wiser. Leaving it to official channels to just have to do it himself in the end because the Aurors were a disorganized mess was just a waste of time. Next time, Riddle wouldn't even know because if Riddle knew he would want to investigate, and then Harry's workday would double. He wasn't dealing with the hassle a second time.

"You don't have to stay Harry. I understand your worry, but I'll be fine."

"You want me to leave?" Harry wouldn't make the man uncomfortable in his own home. If Riddle wanted him gone he'd go and... camp outside. He still needed Riddle alive for his apartment.

"I don't want to offend, Harry... but I'm not particularly clear on how you intend to help me in a fight."

Harry snorted in amusement. Right, he was what he always wanted to be... just Harry. He had no reputation and no one expected him to know how to duel. It was...strange and new. Not as glorious as he expected it to be since he was used to a certain level of respect for his skill but not bad. Not bad at all. He was not expected to solve every damn problem and it was peaceful. Lonely, but peaceful.

"I don't particularly plan to help unless you need it." Like really really needed. "Think of me as an expensive phone holder that drinks your wine. In case of an emergency, I'll break out the wine and call someone." Probably in that order.

Riddle took a step forward. "That's not needed, Harry. It's more likely you'll get hurt than me."

"I'll be fine," Harry easily dismissed, "I just want you to have some backup in case you need it." After seeing Riddle's skill, Harry knew that his presence was not needed. But even the best need backup in case things went south.

"I can call someone else to stay over," Riddle insisted.

"Then the assassin won't do it tonight because they'll know you are aware. And we'll have to do this song and dance another night and I'd really prefer to have this wrapped up before the concert."

"But they'll do it while you are here?" Riddle asked with a raised eyebrow.

"Yeah, why not? I'm harmless and I have a reason that is not related to your safety to be here. At least... I hope that I don't scare them off?" Harry almost asked, unsure.

Riddle looked at him seriously. "Harry, you wouldn't scare off a kitten."

Harry laughed at Riddle's unexpected honesty. "Excellent," he said joyfully, "So they'll do it sooner rather than later because the longer they wait the longer you have to figure it out."

"And you won't tell me who it is?"

Harry smiled and closed his eyes and did not respond. Riddle has always been blind about the loyalty of his followers; takes it for granted. Even a dog betrays a master that beats it.

"Then go to bed, you are dead on your feet."

Harry opened his eyes in confusion. "You have a guest room?" He hadn't seen it but with magic, spaces could be altered.

"No, my room."

Harry opened his eyes and sat up quickly. "Share a bed?" he asked incredulously. "Are you crazy? You are my boss."

Riddle opened and closed his mouth a few times before he managed to speak. "*Really?* This is the line you choose not to cross?"

"I'm your assistant. It's crazy inappropriate to be found in bed with the boss."

Riddle looked at him as if he couldn't believe what was coming out of Harry's mouth. "...you offered sex. Multiple times, might I recall. This is just sleeping."

"Yeah, in the past. And you said no so we are over that. Besides, I said it is inappropriate to be *found* in bed with the boss." Harry had no plans past, present, or future to be *found* in bed with the boss and that is what would happen when Aurors barged in after a (hopefully) unsuccessful attempt. He was a private man and did not enjoy his sex life or presumed sex life being public.

Riddle frowned. "I did not say no."

"It wasn't an enthusiastic yes so in my book that is a no."

"What sense does it make that you stay over at my house and not sleep in my bed? That's the alibi."

"It's the alibi with your close group but not with the Auror force. With them, you are leaving me in the living room working all night because you are a sadistic bastard. Way more believable."

"Harry, you can't be in the living room. I can't protect you there. You are exhausted and the killer would easily kill you in your sleep before going to my room."

"Don't worry about me. I'm a light sleeper."

"Harry, go to bed or go home."

Harry thought about it seriously. Sleeping beside someone you wanted

to have sex with but weren't sounded awkward. Like *staring at the ceiling, unable to sleep, hearing his breaths* awkward. In the end, the thought of going into *that* apartment with leaky, craked ceilings, no kitchen to speak of, no food, no hot water, neighbors screaming was enough of a deterrent.

And Riddle was kind of ok.

Whatever.

He didn't want the man to die, sue him. The Wizarding World was sort of oka-ish too with him in charge, which is leagues better than the dystopian hell it was with other politicians in charge. And Harry might have a slight crush. Not that that had anything to do with it. It's just, the man was ok and no need for him to die.

"Fine," Harry agreed with a frown, "We can say you had me standing in the room to use as a meat shield."

"No one would believe that."

"As always, you are underestimating the terror you inspire." Wasn't he just torturing someone? He was delusional if he thought people didn't know.

"Do I inspire fear in you?" Riddle asked with a tilted head. "No, I don't," Riddle answered himself after a moment of looking at Harry intently, "I realize that now. Come, I have some old clothes I can lend you."

"That's alright. I can sleep like this."

"Harry...you are not touching my bed with day clothes."

"I can sleep in a chair in your room."

"Bed or go."

Harry sighed in defeat. "You have a spare toothbrush?"

Riddle smiled and fuck him, it was an adorable smile. Evil people shouldn't have adorable, fond smiles. Particularly when they were close enough to touch in a dimly lit living room. Harry wasn't a saint, ok?

"I have a new one. Bought it just this week." Harry could bet this week's salary that it will be the same toothbrush he has at his

apartment, make, model, and color. When Harry made no move to leave the couch, Riddle said, "You never did finish your cup of wine. Want some now?"

"God yes."

Riddle got up and brought wine and two new glasses and sank back down beside Harry close enough that their shoulders bumped. The living room was dark but the light from the kitchen and the stores on the street gave enough light. The view of the street below and the people milling around the stores was calming. Riddle served him a glass and served himself one. Harry relaxed back to enjoy the view.

"You know, at first, I thought you loved me."

Harry almost spat the wine. He turned in surprise to Riddle. "What? When?!"

"When you saved me from the demon."

Harry frowned in confusion. "Why?!"

"You seemed to know everything about me. At a glance, you could tell that the person that wore my face wasn't me. You told me it wasn't my smile, or my posture, or the way I talked. I thought you were in love with me," at Harry's startled face, Riddle smiled sardonically. "In hindsight, a stupid conclusion. But I didn't know then that you could have told the same thing to Greta from first floor," Riddle said with a touch of bitterness.

"When did you realized I didn't love you?" Harry asked curiously trying to remember if there was a point that Riddle started treating him differently.

"It took me longer than I care to admit."

Harry was baffled. "Did I say or do something that led you on? I think I told you I preferred to be bodily mutilated before going with you to a party at Malfoy Manor. What part of that was ambiguous?"

Riddle's lips twitched. "I remember. I thought you were being funny."

Harry laughed. He couldn't not laugh. "I was being deadly serious. I literally wanted nothing from you."

"I thought you were playing hard to get. Trying to make yourself seem

more interesting. It's a thing with some people. They pretend to be aloof and disinterested but it's just that...pretend."

"So? When was it?" Harry prodded when Riddle did not continue.

Riddle drank his wine and looked out the window as he thought.

"I'm not sure. It was a slow realization. As I got to know you better it just clicked that you were not pretending to be disinterested. By the second week of having breakfasts, I knew I could walk out and never speak to you again and you wouldn't care."

"I would have cared." It even sounded weak to Harry's ears.

Riddle scoffed. "About the coffee."

"...yes, to be fair at that point the coffee was a major selling point but you are a great conversationalist." And Harry found it endlessly fascinating to know a sane Tom Riddle. To find out small, meaningless details about a man that haunted his past, like how he eats his eggs. Tom Riddle, who once became Lord Voldemort and wanted Harry Potter dead, liked poached eggs. It fascinated Harry. He wished he could tell Hermione and Ron these things.

"That's another infuriating thing about you."

"Another?" Harry asked in amused bafflement taking another long sip from his glass. He felt he needed more alcohol in his system for this conversation. "There's a list?" he asked curiously.

"I hadn't had that much trouble impressing someone in decades but wow are you hard to impress."

"Really? I've always found you impressive. The whole Overlord thing is neat."

"Neat," Riddle repeated deadpanned. "It's neat. I am the highest authority of the British Magical Community, unchallenged for decades and you find it...neat. I have heard you be more effusive to the lunch lady."

"Nicole makes the best chicken and I feel she is not recognized enough for her service," Harry defended.

"Noted."

"What happened next?"

"Well, I then made the mistake of thinking we were friends... but then I saw you with your friends. You are different with them."

"Everyone is different with their best friends," Harry easily dismissed.

"Are they?"

"Yes, best friends get the raw, unfiltered version of yourself."

"And who is the raw, unfiltered Harry Potter?"

Harry laughed. "Surprisingly boring."

"I doubt that."

"My biggest ambition right now is moving," Harry challenged.

"You are on the brink of inventing a ritual that could revolutionize rune magic forever. Having the solution to any problem in seconds... it's fiction at this point and you have a workable idea on how to do that."

"And yet, it is that full kitchen with a functioning sink that has my heart and mind."

"We are soon going to Atlantis, possibly the first humans that have seen the city in ten thousand years. And if your theory is right, meet whatever became of them."

"True. That's exciting, but defending my thesis will be a nightmare when everyone and their dog will want to say it's either fake or not really Atlantis but some other ancient city. I should have stuck with an easy subject and left Atlantis as a side project."

"...Atlantis as a side project," Riddle repeated. "At least I'm not the only one that has trouble impressing you."

Harry snorted in amusement and they fell into an easy silence. Harry finished his cup and Riddle re-filled his glass before the conversation continued.

"You were good today."

Harry looked at Riddle with confusion.

"The proposal," Riddle clarified. "It might get passed. You did well."



Harry snorted. "It was not hard to look good in comparison. You need to hire people for that sort of thing. Lestrage was talking to a vegan witch about dragon hunting. She looked close to passing out. And Snape talked for half an hour about the uses of slug slime to a poor Ambassador. I felt his will to live wither by minute ten. Lavender is the witch you need for that sort of negotiation. She's brilliant with people."

"I have you now. I don't need anyone else."

"You got lucky today. I'm terrible with new people, but Mrs. Ito carried the conversation and my dead weight"

Riddle laughed and served himself more wine. "Asami Ito had to jump through hoops before you deigned to even look at her. I don't think she is used to her beauty or her reputation not doing all the work for her."

"She's nice."

"Nice? I don't think the word has ever been used to describe her."

"She's going to help me with my ritual."

"After you saved her son's life by nonchalantly writing it the cure on a napkin after they asked you once on a whim. It's the least she can do. Anyone else in your position would have asked her servitude for at least fifteen years."

Harry frowned. "People suck."

"You really have no ambition. You could have asked her any amount of money or favors and you asked nothing."

Harry used to have ambition. The hat thought so at least. But now...Harry was content just being. "The things I want, I have. Or I am in the process of obtaining."

"So you've said. You are happy being a tree on stage," Riddle said with distaste.

Harry laughed and agreed. "Or an interesting side character. Life is easier that way."

Harry finished his second glass and got up with the empty wine bottle to put them both in the kitchen. Riddle followed him there and

silently led Harry through a dark hallway and the master room. Riddle didn't bother with lights and Harry could follow Riddle even blindfolded. Riddle opened a cabinet and passed him a new toothbrush. Harry did not even pretend to be surprised that it was the same toothbrush he had at home, just took it and started brushing his teeth while Riddle went back to the room and came back with clean clothes that he put on the counter and left. Harry changed, left the bathroom, and all but threw himself to the bed.

"Oh my god." Harry rolled over and hid his face in the pillows. "What's this mattress made of? What are these sheets made of? And where can I get them?"

"They are one thousand galleon sheets and twenty thousand galleon mattress."

"Damn. Heaven is expensive," Harry slurred, his face pressed against a sinfully soft pillow. He didn't even hear Riddle get to bed before he was passed out. In the end, Riddle was right, Harry doesn't hear or see the intruder until he is jolted awake by a scream of rage.

## Chapter 12

Adrenaline is one heck of a drug because Harry was fully awake, with the closest weapon available in his hand, the gun he had stored under the pillow, and firing a shot before he even knows what he's aiming at. He just knows that it is not Riddle. He fires two more times before thinking about finding his wand. It had been right by the gun but it must have rolled during the night. It took a few seconds of fumbling to find it. He tried a *lumos* three times before giving up. Right, right, no magic. He knew that. He has to fight the sheets that were trapping his legs to carefully walk towards the door with his gun pointed at the corner the intruder was hiding. Riddle was still shouting his head off so Harry wastes no time in turning the light on.

Regulus Black was slumped in the corner, bleeding from three different bullet wounds and in no shape to fight but Harry kept the gun carefully pointed at his head as he assessed Riddle. Riddle was still on the bed with his eyes closed and seemingly peacefully sleeping.

Harry frowned in confusion at Riddle's very closed, very relaxed mouth. The fuck...? The shouting is in his head, Harry suddenly realized and launches at Riddle to see what's wrong.

"Move and the next shot is to your head," Harry warned.

"Harry," Regulus gasped wetly. "Don't you understand? He'll never give up power."

"Then you fucking move to another country or I don't know, postulate yourself as a political opponent," Harry snapped with exasperation. He could have been sleeping on a heavenly bed right now. But no, he was shooting a diagnostic test on Riddle like an idiot. And of course, it doesn't work. It's not a spell he feels confident doing wandless, if wandless magic was even an option right now.

He checks for breathing and pulse. Riddle's chest isn't rising and Harry doesn't feel a pulse for ten seconds. He sends an SOS text to Martinez and Pike before opening a small bottle of Phoenix tears he keeps for emergencies. His hands shake and he accidentally gives Riddle the entire bottle of tears instead of the one or two he had been aiming for. He's sending the bill to Riddle as soon as the bastard has a pulse. He checks for a pulse again. Still nothing. He drags Riddle's body to the floor and starts chest compressions.

"Don't bother... It's too late," Black panted with a bloody smile.

"Speak for yourself, buddy," Harry shot back. He was valiantly ignoring the puddle of blood from Black that was slowly soaking his knees as he continued compressions.

"This is my last gift for the Wizarding World," Black wheezed as he collapsed.

"Oh no. You are not dying. I'll make sure you survive today."

Like a rising tide, he felt Riddle's presence watching through his eyes in mounting horror. "It's fine. You are fine. Relax," Harry murmured.

*I'M DEAD!* Harry flinched back with the force of Riddle's roar in his brain.

*Yeah, a little dead right now. Nothing we won't fix. Relax and let me work.*

*I'M DEAD!*

*And you'll stay dead if you don't calm the fuck down and let me pump blood to your brain until whatever the fuck you were dosed with runs out of your system.*

*How I'm I in your head?*

*Let's worry about that later, ok? Hospital first. Just..uh...hang with me until you have a pulse.*

The front door of the apartment crashed open and heavy footsteps thundered through. *Thank fucking god, help.*

*They might be more assassins. Hide!*

*If I stop compressions you die-die.* Harry felt Riddle warring with the decision and reminded him, *It's my choice to make. Besides' I'm sure. I would recognize those elephant steps anywhere.*

The door of the room hit the wall with a bang and Pike and Martinez were beside Harry in seconds taking over. Pike went directly to Riddle while Martinez took Black.

*Don't let them take my body. Follow them!*

*I will. Give me a second, ok?*

*Why are you this tired? What's wrong with you?*

*I'm fine. It's just. You are heavy you know? It's kind of crowded in here. It's like an elephant sitting on my chest.*

*Don't tell me you are having a heart attack!*

*Is this what this is? Fucking sucks. We'll follow your body; just give me a second to catch my breath.*

Harry got to his knees and using the wall he pushed himself up and walked to the kitchen that was rapidly filling with Aurors. Someone took him by the elbow.

“Medics! Something is wrong with Potter.”

“He might also be poisoned.”

“Not poison,” Harry grunted. “Take me to the hospital. Now.” His vision was blurring and each breath felt like a knife. As much as it hurt, he held to Riddle’s soul fiercely and forced it to stay there. To assimilate. To find a bit of room inside his body, as the pain got progressively worse. He couldn’t hear Riddle over the ringing in his ears, but he could feel this giant in his head, and in his torso that was foreign and did not fit but somehow was still there.

*Once a Horocrux, always a Horocrux,* Harry guessed. But he wasn’t a baby anymore, and this wasn't a sliver of a soul.

He just needed five more minutes, he thought, as he was being floo-ed to the hospital. Just five more minutes as he was set on a bed and diagnostic test after diagnostic test was done. Five more minutes, as he vomited last night's tacos and then all of his gastric juices and kept reaching because his body wanted to expulse something but wasn't

clear on how to go about it. When five minutes became an eternity it became one more minute. Just one. Breathe and hold on for one extra minute.

Where the fuck was Riddle's body? He needed to know if it was safe because he couldn't hold out much longer.

*Harry, don't let go.*

"I'm not fucking letting go," Harry snapped, making a Healer jump in fright. "I just need an update on the situation."

"Sir! Sir! You can't get up. Sir! Lay back down, we are doing all we can. Mr. Riddle is in safe hands."

Harry felt soft restraints magically bind him to the bed when he clumsily tried to get up.

"Please, I need to go see Riddle. Please, just one moment."

"Sir, you are in no condition to visit anyone right now and Mr. Riddle is in no condition to receive visitors."

Harry started crying as he felt the pain intensify to unbearable levels. No torture he had ever received reached this level. He was going to lose his mind to the pain. Where was his wand? He patted his pockets and found his cellphone. He couldn't see the screen but he marked the talk button twice to call the last person he talked with.

"Harry! Harry! Where are you? They say you are at the hospital too?" He heard Pike through the small speaker.

"Help, please come," Harry sobbed. "Please come." His phone was yanked from his hand and he heard the same healer assure Pike he was disoriented and talking gibberish. Harry screamed as he felt as if someone was tearing his abdomen.

It felt as if he closed his eyes for one moment.

When he opened them again he was in a dark room, lying on a small hospital bed. He wasn't restrained anymore so he shifted and moved to see where he was. The room was softly illuminated with nightlights and Riddle was on a queen-sized bed beside him.

"Why is your bed bigger?" Harry slurred.

Riddle snorted. "That's what you ask?"

"Yes. I find it highly unfair."

"I'm glad you are ok, Harry."

"Me too." Harry turned around and was half asleep before realizing he should return the sentiment. "I mean. I'm glad you are ok too."

Harry woke up to the sun brilliantly shining from the windows and a Healer talking to Riddle. He pretended to still be asleep to not have to acknowledge the person or the conversation. He felt like grated cheese.

"One thing went really wrong for you and two things went really right. You were dosed with Instant Death, but were immediately dosed with *just enough* Phoenix tears to repair the worst of the damage seconds later by the first person that saw you and the second person that found you is the only Poison Specialist in the country with the knowledge and materials needed to gain you the extra half hour that the Healers needed to repair your body. Somehow, miraculously, your soul did not part to the other side. Mr. Riddle, you survived an unsurvivable event. Your will to live must be incredible."

"I understand I was very lucky. Any word yet on why Mr. Potter was affected?"

"No sir. We were unable to find any cause for his malady. It may have been a strong emotional reaction to the night. Thankfully it seems to have passed."

Harry snorted, destroying any chance of pretending to still be sleeping but he kept his eyes closed and his smile hidden. *Strong emotional reaction my ass.* The Healer made his goodbyes with promises of coming back soon.

"Harry," Riddle called when the door closed.

"Hmmm?" Harry threw the blanket on top of his face to block out the sun. Immediately the room darkened and he didn't even notice falling asleep.

"Harry," Riddle started seriously. Harry perked up from his slouched

position in the lounge chair flipping through shitty hospital cable TV.  
"There's something important we need to talk about."

That doesn't sound good. Harry looked from MTV top 10 hits to Riddle and considered if he needed to turn off the TV after finally finding a good channel or if muting it would be ok.

"I think you are my soulmate."

Harry laughed and turned the volume a bit up. "Yeah, pal, we are soulmates alright. And next week I'll marry the love of my life, Martinez."

"I'm serious."

"So I'm I." How can someone have all the facts and reach all the wrong conclusions, Harry wondered.

"How else what happened to us be possible? You literally held my soul in your body to prevent me from passing over."

Harry stopped pretending to pay attention to Riddle and went back to MTV. "Soulmates don't exist outside of corset-ripping novels where it is a convenient excuse for the protagonist not seeking therapy for clearly unhealthy behaviors because of the false belief that there is someone perfect for them that will accept all of their bullshit."

"Then how you would explain what happened?" Riddle asked frustrated.

"I don't know, but there are many things I don't know and the world doesn't stop spinning. Soulmates are not a thing, have never been a thing and no one has ever proved they are a thing."

"This article in souls and soul-vessels can in part explain some of what happened. The author is anonymous but it is believed they are the leading expert in the field because this is the most complete information on the subject. We are soulmates. It makes perfect sense." So that was what Riddle had been doing all morning. Harry could have saved him the trouble.

"Let me see that. I know that article. It doesn't talk about soulmates or any such rubbish."

"Not by name, but the article seems to hint at it."



"It doesn't hint, mention, suggest, or allude to soulmates," Harry said carelessly as he continued to flip through channels. MTV had lost its appeal.

"How would you know?"

"How would I know?" Harry asked incredulously with a laugh. He threw the paper back at Riddle. "The author is HJP, I wonder who can that be? Man, you are going to have to scourge the world to find them," Harry said with an insufferable smirk as he found the magical version of the James Bond movie.

Riddle looked at him with a blank face for a few seconds before saying softly, "Sometimes I really hate you."

Harry laughed as he turned back to the movie. "That I can believe."

"You are so easy to detest. Are you sure no one has tried to kill you before? Because you make it tempting."

Harry snorted and pointedly did not answer that. Maybe. Maybe a few people had tried to kill him. Once or twice. Or twenty times. At least twice for being annoying. "Well as the newly declared leading expert in the field, I'm telling you, soulmates are not a thing."

"When did you become an expert on souls?" Riddle asked with irritation.

"Misspent youth."

The answer seemed to annoy an already annoyed Riddle. "When did you publish it?"

"It was an assignment on an elective at Ilvermorny. The professor convinced me on publishing it." After a few beers and a lost bet.

"You wrote thirty pages with the most complete information about souls, soul-vessels, and the damage of killing curses on the soul I could find ...for an assignment...on an elective...at Ilverorny."

"Yes."

"It has detailed instructions in the appendices on how to do every ritual mentioned. You know how impossible that is to find?"

"Because it's a bitch to publish detailed instructions about rituals especially about things as delicate as rituals that mess with your soul."

I had to jump through hoops to have it included. But the damage people do doing the wrong ritual because they are following vague instructions is worse than what the actual ritual does."

"I read this paper the month it came out. I was really impressed and tried to find the author. And all this time you were at the Ministry basement shuffling papers."

"I was busy working, doing my Master's AND inventing an extremely complex spell capable of multilayer, individual reasoning for tackling problems without human input," Harry corrected because to say he was shuffling papers was saying he was wasting his second chance at life. And he had Strong Opinions about not wasting his second shot at life.

"I feel that Britain's school system failed you."

The movie had him rolling his eyes at the absurdity. "Studying advanced subjects is not just about intelligence. I probably did not have the emotional maturity as a teenager that I had at twenty-five to tackle a complex subject with nuance. Besides, I was probably a ball of teenage angst. There's no way anyone could have forced me to study soul-vessels in a dusty library." Unless it was life or death. Even then, he had been more than happy to delegate to Hermione. "I would have been too worried about a crush not liking me to care about life after death."

Harry turned to look at the door when he heard the handle move to see Pike entering. "What are you talking about life after death after you nearly gave a heart attack?" Pike said in greeting as he let the door bang against the wall, his hands full of bags of greasy food. Riddle sent Pike a withering glare, but put his wand away and did not oppose the intrusion. Not that it would have made a difference to either Pike or Harry.

"I hope you don't have tacos in there. I feel I can never eat them again without wanting to throw up."

"Hamburgers and chips."

"We are talking about Harry's surprising knowledge of souls and soul vessels. Apparently, he is the leading expert."

"That... doesn't surprise me, actually."

"It doesn't?" Riddle pressed. Harry also looked at Pike in confusion. To

his knowledge, Pike doesn't know anything about Horcruxes or Deathly Hallows. Harry barely acknowledges it to himself much less talks about it.

"Haven't you heard?" Pike said. "Harry is catnip for necromancers."

Ah.

That.

Harry was uncomfortable with Riddle's piercing stare.

"No... I did not know that." Riddle seemed to be just about done with his bullshit.

"They do seem to be...drawn to me for some reason," Harry agreed when Riddle looked like he would commit murder if he dodged another question.

"It's like they see Harry and he becomes their religion." Pike, shut up. "Whatever Harry wants or needs or makes him happy becomes their purpose. If Harry frowns they become agitated like an angry beehive. I'm sure that if Harry asked about souls or soul-vessels they'd be more than happy to find every text known to mankind that had the word and thank Harry for the opportunity."

Riddle looked at Harry, "Is that true?"

"It's difficult to explain, but they do seem... invested in me." Obsessed.

"What do you think caused it?"

Harry shrugged. "Who knows?" And proving that Harry does not fear death, he said, "Misspent youth."

"You can't blame EVERYTHING on your misspent youth," Riddle almost shouted, surprising Pike with the intensity. Harry did a bad job of hiding his smile. Really, Riddle could be the cutest sometimes. So easy to rile up. Harry signaled Pike to pass a burger and went back to passively watch the movie while he ate.

"Well, there were teenagers and then there was Potter."

"I know, right? I feel if anyone can abuse the misspent youth excuse is me," Harry explained as he dug into the bag for fries. Fishing for the small crispy ones that were always at the bottom of the bag. Those were always the best.

"You don't even remember!" Riddle hissed.

"What's so mysterious about it? It was me but as an unsupervised teen and young adult with no shortage of time, poor impulse control, and the survival skills of a toddler. I have no doubt I touched something I wasn't supposed to touch, doing something I definitely wasn't supposed to be doing, in a place I had no business being. Multiple times." And if that wasn't a perfect summary of his teenage years, nothing was.

"You still need adult supervision," Pike added. "Remember Brazil? We left you alone for a fucking half hour, Potter. Thirty minutes!"

"What happened in Brazil?"

"Nothing," Harry responded at the same time Pike responded, "Zombies."

"All things considered," Harry pointedly changed the subject, "I think that having the occasional Necromancer be nice to me is a benign side effect."

You know, among the other side effects he was ignoring.

"Is that the reason then?" Riddle asked at the very end of his short patience.

Harry blinked in confusion. "Is that the reason for what?"

"Are necromancers the reason you know so much about souls?"

Harry frowned. "God no."

Riddle really did get up and stormed from the room.

Harry turned to Pike, "You brought beer, right?"

"What kind of friend would I be if I didn't? I was just waiting for him to leave so we wouldn't have to share."

Harry made Pike get him a novel about soulmates from the Gift Shop. It was positively pornographic and he made sure to read parts of it out loud and comment his opinions on the ridiculous plot and anatomically impossible positions. In the name of entertainment of

course. Hospitals could be very dull places.

"Should we get matching tattoos and tell people we were born with them?... It'd be fun to tell everyone we saw the world black and white but that when we met each other we suddenly could see colors...Big, Bad, and Mean being abusive again? Run girl, you deserve better...He's an ex? That's ten times worse. You never go back to your ex."

"You've never dated an ex?"

Harry looked up from the book he was reading spread out on the queen-sized bed to see Riddle with his quill posed but not touching the paper. "I thought you were ignoring me. And no, I don't talk to exes, I'm not friends with exes and I certainly never go back to an ex."

"Your not friends with exes? What if it was an amicable breakup?"

"Then in ten years, maybe, we can be friends."

Riddle dropped the quill and turned to face him. "Seriously? Not one ex is in your life?"

"None. And I like it like that. They are dead to me."

"Isn't that a bit harsh? People break up all the time. Sometimes for stupid reasons."

"Then it was someone that broke my heart for a stupid reason and doesn't deserve my time or friendship."

"What if they were your friend before you dated, would you be friends after?"

"I don't date friends for that reason. And I don't date within my friend circle. I want them completely out of my life after a breakup."

"What if you break up but want to try again?"

"There's no try again."

"So there's no room for mistakes with you?"

"Of course there is. As long as it is a conversation and not a breakup."

Riddle did not respond so Harry went back to reading and commenting on the book.

"I'm just gently teasing him," Harry defended when Pike confronted him.

"Is it? Is it really?" Pike questioned as he tried again to feed a pound to the vending machine. It kept spitting it back out and since it was the Wizarding World, with a hiss and actual spit. "Or is it hazing at this point?"

"I just want him to drop the subject and never mention it again. To cringe every time he remembers suggesting it."

"So he's right? You wouldn't care this much if he was wrong."

"He's not right, but too close to the truth for my taste. Soulmates are not real. But, sadly, we do have a unique soul connection that traveled through universes and bodies."

"Essentially what the myth of Soulmates says it is."

"Soulmates are not real."

"But soul connections are? Aren't you just being pedantic with the name?"

"The soul connection is there because he fucked with his soul and in the process fucked with mine. Look, I just want him to drop the subject. He knows it's there, he knows I know it's there, I just want it to go unacknowledged for the rest of our natural lives because functionally it is a vestige of another life with no real purpose right now."

"No purpose? None at all?"

Harry glared.

"Not one single tiny little thing of use for this?"

"No."

"Where is Riddle right now, Potter?"

"In the bathroom," Harry answered without having to think about it.

"And you know that three floors down? You can also apparently hold his soul in your body if it's life or death. So does it really have no purpose?"

"I'm going to make him drop the subject."

"Of course you are. He has developed an eye twitch every time you grab the book and it's only been a few hours. By all means, snuff the life of this new exciting thing he found until he finds it just as dull and depressing as you do. I believe in you, if anyone can do it, it's you...I just want to know what's got your panties in a twist with the subject?"

"Soulmates have a romantic connotation. It has preconceptions of what our relationship has to be like. We have a soul connection that it's a strange, random fluke of the universe, and it doesn't have to mean anything."

Pike hummed and annoyingly did not say anything.

It was their last night in the hospital and Harry was used to Riddle initiating these intimate moments without any wish for it to lead to sex. Harry was resigned that sex was off the table. Maybe Riddle didn't want or like sex or he didn't want sex with Harry but whatever the reason, Harry respected it. It didn't make it any easier for him to be in the same bed with an attractive man while that attractive man was studying your naked torso but Harry was determinedly watching an out of season Christmas movie and counting the number of red and green outfits the producers could fit in one hour thirty minutes. So far it was fifteen on what was supposed to be a three-day holiday vacation for the protagonists.

"You have a basilisk tattoo?"

Harry had just finished taking a shower in the ridiculously lavish (for a hospital) bathroom and had come out with long pajama pants from the gift shop and a towel around his shoulders ready to drop to his twin-size bed and sleep. But Riddle had been awake and working (shocking) and wanted some company.

"Yeah," Harry responded as he opened a candy bar wrapper with his teeth. Movies and snacks in Riddle's queen size hospital bed, while Riddle worked on whatever he had to work, did not seem like a bad plan. Pike had left enough vending matching snacks to last him a month.

"Why?"

Harry bit two-thirds of the bar in one single bite, offering the rest to Riddle who to Harry's surprise took it. "First off, they are cool, and second I guess to remind myself that I'm braver than I think I am."

"Why does a basilisk represent that for you?" Riddle asked as he ate the second half of the candy and threw the wrapper to the night table, work apparently forgotten for the night.

Harry thought about it, trying to put his experience with the Basilisk and the importance of it in his life without the whole 'I killed one when I was eleven and it was both cool and traumatizing. Let's not do that again,' because in this life that would be one big fat lie. The basilisk was probably happy and alive in the basement of Hogwarts and Riddle would know that.

"There are challenges in life that sometimes feel unbeatable and that are larger than life and make you feel small and impotent. The tattoo reminds me that I have beaten those odds."

Riddle mulled on that before moving on to the next tattoo.

"A bear?"

"A Teddy bear. Let's skip that one for now." Riddle did not seem happy to skip over a tattoo but continued on exploring Harry's tattoos, moving Harry's left arm this and that way for any small tattoo that he might have missed before moving over.

"What are the chances that the quirky inn has only one room left and is a single bed room? I'm guessing 150%." That they are probably still not going to have sex in because this wasn't that kind of movie. Harry laughed. Maybe he was stuck in the wrong movie too.

"Harry?"

Harry looked from the screen to Riddle's face, "yeah?"

"Pay me attention."

Harry laughed. "I am paying you attention." Waaay more than I should for this platonic friendship to work. Harry forced his mind back to the movie and not how close Riddle was.

"Why a knife?"

Harry activated the tattoo and in one smooth motion was armed with



a knife. "It's handy. Oh look, the car broke down during a snowstorm. Isn't that shocking and unpredictable."

Riddle took the knife from his slack hold and tested the edge. It could cut bone with the same ease as it could cut ropes. Harry mostly uses it to clean his nails. Not much action these days.

"Do you even know how to use it?"

Ouch.

Harry took the knife back and without looking away from the movie threw it at the wall. It landed on a poster. More importantly, it landed on the eye of the healer promoting the new wing of the hospital. He immediately called back the knife to his hand and in one smooth motion returned the knife to the tattoo. Yeah, he was showing off a bit. Sue him. He had a bit of pride that Riddle had inadvertently stomped on. Harry rummaged through the plastic bag for some salty chips.

"So we are in agreement they will find a convenient cabin unlocked and with a functioning fireplace where they can spend a cozy night talking about their feelings?" Harry looked at Riddle when he didn't respond after a few seconds to see the man looking at him intently.

"What?" Harry questioned.

Riddle cleared his face of the expression. "I would have an asthma attack entering to an abandoned house and lighting the fireplace and I'm not even asthmatic."

"I know, right? And they are even using the moth-eaten blankets on the cupboard. I almost prefer to die of cold." But in the movie the blankets were conveniently new looking, soft, and fluffy.

"Who taught you to use a knife? And a gun for that matter."

"Martinez."

"What? What is that face for?"

Harry hadn't even noticed he had made a face. "He's going to force me back to training. I just know it. This is just giving him the perfect excuse to drag my ass back in shape."

"I thought you said you couldn't be forced to do anything," Riddle said

as he took the bag of chips from Harry's hands to eat.

"I lied. He is going to guilt me into it. Say it's for his peace of mind to know I can defend myself. Just you wait. I can feel my sore muscles already. And the tinnitus from gun practice." He wasn't going to fuck around with ear safety this time around, that's for sure.

"I could help train you too. With magic. Guns and knives aren't my specialties."

"Don't worry about it. Martinez is particular about training and doesn't like to not be in control of every part of it."

"They could use a charm to clean the blankets."

"Haven't you been seeing the movie? She's a muggle that doesn't know he's a wizard so he can't use magic."

"Hmm. I must have missed that conversation."

Harry frowned at Riddle. "It's basically the whole plot."

"You've been distracting."

Harry felt an involuntary shiver go down his spine at the tone. He means nothing of it, Potter. Get your mind out of the gutter. "Fine, fine. I'll shut up and stop commenting on the movie. Pass me your computer if you are done with it."

"Why?"

"I haven't bought the concert tickets or hotel rooms. Now that I'm sure we are getting out of here tomorrow I have to buy them."

Harry took Riddle's credit card from his wallet and proceeded to buy the tickets.

"Is that the amount for all the tickets?"

"No, just one."

"That's absurd."

"We are meeting the band backstage and staying in a VIP area with food and drinks included."

"Then we can cut the number of people."

"It was you that decided to invite your whole circle."

"That was before I knew the cost per ticket. Lestrage is not worth one thousand five hundred pounds even if I sell him for organs." Harry laughed and reduced the number of people.

"Why aren't you booking hotel rooms?"

"Because I just saw an inspiring Christmas movie and now want the Bed and Breakfast experience."

"It's a ski resort."

"Same thing. It has the homey vibe."

"It's four times more expensive."

"Good thing money is not a problem."

"Give me back my credit card. I'm staying off your head. You are too damn expensive and your mind-to-mouth filter is nonexistent. It's practically hearing inside an echo chamber."

Yeah, cause Harry is no dummy and he doesn't let Riddle "hear" anything he's not willing to say out loud. Harry finished paying everything and passed Riddle his credit card and got back to the movie.

"Let me guess, they got together without a single conversation about their future with their wildly different lifestyles and goals, and who is going to compromise?"

"Yes."

"The perfect trainwreck setup for the sequel where he finds a nice country witch and she finds a nice city muggle boy and they both finally get their happy ending."

Riddle hummed and after a second asked, "What are your goals?"

"Traveling the world," Harry said automatically. "That hidden city El Dorado in Mexico is calling my name. So is that Dragon Palace in China."

"So you wouldn't consider settling in England?"

"Not in a million years. If I can convince Martinez and Pike to move

out I'll never visit."

"You hate it here so much?"

Harry turned to face Riddle, to see his face hard and shuttered. He may have been a bit too honest with the all but in name King of the Wizarding World. He tried to find a single good thing about England but came short. "There are worse places in the world," Harry slowly acknowledged. "And no place is perfect."

"What exactly do you hate about it here?"

Everything and nothing since this wasn't the same place that betrayed him time and time again, but that emotional reaction was difficult to shake off.

"Nothing you can change, Riddle."

"You don't know that."

"Want to see another movie?"

"I want you to pay me attention."

"I am paying you attention."

"So what if you have a relationship here?"

Oh wow, they were having this conversation. Right now. With the movie credits playing in the background and without even a kiss beforehand. They might have been having this conversation for a while now that he thinks about it.

No matter the number of relationships he's had and the amount of times he's had to have this conversation, it didn't stop it from being horribly awkward. He scratched his neck and looked back at the tv. "Yeah, that's the thing...I'm not planning to have a relationship before moving."

"Oh."

There was an awkward moment where he was conscious of being shirtless in bed with Riddle before he closed the computer and got up with the excuse of putting the computer at the desk. Harry turned the TV off and went to wash his teeth again. Riddle was back working so

Harry dropped to the twin-sized bed and went to sleep. He was almost asleep when Riddle called him.

“Harry?”

Harry turned to face Riddle’s bed and see the man looking at him intently. “Yes?”

“In the article, you mention the possibility of humans being soul-vessels.”

Harry felt his throat constrict. “Yeah.”

“The article was published three years ago.”

Harry exhaled slowly. “Yeah.”

“You were never going to tell me were you?”

“No.” Harry never had any intention of telling Riddle about this soul connection and would have died with the knowledge had it not come to light like this.

Riddle did not respond.

## Chapter 13

It was their last morning at the hospital and Harry was a bit salty. While Riddle had gotten every treatment under the sun and then some vitamin-enriched serum to top it off, Harry had only gotten a bed, food, and a talk about nerves. He was unnaturally tired and had slept most of the hospital admission but everyone had brushed it off as lazy. When he made a passing comment about it to Riddle, the sociopath had the nerve to say that if he needed treatment he only had to explain exactly what happened and he will personally make sure to deliver the treatment.

So.

He was silently salty. Not that Riddle sympathized. Last night's conversation had left an awkward aftertaste. Riddle had barely looked at him and was only talking the bare minimum. While it stung, Harry at least appreciated that Riddle was being cordial. Harry was trying to push past last night's conversation and get back to normal.

"I feel I wasn't there and this was an entirely different night. So the story is that Black and I got hurt defending you from attackers? And Black is retiring from the force due to his injuries. Is he even alive?" Harry wondered.

Riddle did not look up from his work. "Bellatrix asked me as a favor to let her take care of Regulus so that their family reputation isn't tarnished."

"Poor guy," Harry murmured, "Should have shot him in the head."

"It would have been the merciful option, yes."

Harry wasn't that sorry. There were a thousand other options outside of murder to remove a corrupt politician. Regulus had the money and an old, pureblood family name that carried weight in this fucked up society. He had other options available to him. He chose to kill Riddle and leave Harry as the one to find him in the morning and prime suspect of a murder investigation. So fuck him. Fuck him with a pogo stick. Harry wasn't spending his second life in Azkaban or losing the person who signs his check.

"Do you think anyone else was involved?" Harry asked curiously while he turned the page. Riddle's pen stopped in the air and he turned slowly to look at Harry with empty eyes, "Like who?"

Harry shrugged. Dumbledore? the Order of Phoenix? All of the above? None of the above? Was Dumbledore even alive? Harry hadn't bothered to check. If even Sirius didn't talk to him, why would the headmaster?

But those were thoughts of Harry From Another Universe. Nothing here had hinted at a secret organization trying to bring down the esteemed two-timed former Minister of Magic Tom Riddle. The critics called Riddle a corrupt, unethical, vicious, power-hungry politician. The few that know a bit more about him called him mobster-like and tyrannical.

To Harry, a cute, fluffy version of Lord Voldemort. A very small kitty cat that wouldn't have blipped on his radar. Even common and ordinary with how many corrupt, power-hungry, mobster-like politicians there are. Riddle wasn't even the worst he had seen. At least Riddle kept the country running semi-decently. He gave a fuck that the place wasn't burning down. Yeah, it had one too many Italian restaurants and the same old racism, classism, and bullshit but what's new? Harry had no illusions that he'll see a change in that in his lifetime.

"No. I believe he acted alone," Riddle finally answered, breaking Harry from his thoughts. Harry hummed in understanding and went back to reading the paper. Riddle's eyes narrowed. "Harry?"

Harry looked up from the paper.

"Do you believe we have to worry about accomplices?"

Harry hummed uncaringly. "We'll see, won't we?"

Riddle stopped what he was doing to face Harry seriously. "I don't want any more surprises."

Harry sighed, now annoyed he had started this conversation and that Riddle won't drop it. "Then go find the pieces left of Black and dose him with truth serum."

Riddle got up and walked towards Harry. He crouched until he was eye level with Harry and grabbed Harry's chin so that Harry wasn't looking anywhere else but at Riddle's eyes.

"Tell me why you think there are accomplices," Riddle asked again this time using some legilimens. Harry sighed at the unnecessary theatrics. The man could read his thoughts just as well from the other side of

the room and the spell was beyond redundant as they had a mind link. Riddle's hand on his chin tightened at that thought.

"Not all the assassination plots were by Black. The spoon, for example, I believe was someone else. He just wasn't saving you from them. You have more enemies and we don't know if they were working together or independently."

Riddle nodded but kept his hand in Harry's chin until Harry moved his head to the side to dislodge him. Harry kept reading the novelized version of the events in silence as if having Riddle crouching in front of him was normal. Riddle exhaled noisily as he looked down at the paper, "I can't believe everyone believed I would have you standing all night in a dark room watching me sleep or that I would ever use you as a shield," Riddle said in exasperation finally starting a conversation without prompting.

It was the excuse Harry had given to the Aurors and no one had questioned it. Riddle had believed it unconvincing and thought that the excuse of them being lovers was more plausible. But Harry was confident in his excuse. While the title of Dark Lord wasn't tossed around, Riddle scared people shitless. Believing Harry was intimidated and forced to be in the bedroom due to his job and some bullshit reason was on par with people's view of Riddle and Harry's work relationship (as a slave; not far from the truth).

"Told ya." Harry smiled as he read how he hid behind the brave Regulus Black and later fainted from the nerves. Three guesses on who wrote the article.

"I don't understand people."

"Oh don't worry. Believing that I had sex with you for the job will come soon enough. It always comes full circle we are just not there yet. People are still happy for me, then they get jealous, then angry, then they try to calm their insecurities by assuring themselves I only got it due to some unfair advantage."

"Has that happened before?"

Oh shit. Harry's hands stilled. Not this life.

"That's just how people are," Harry deflected and kept his eyes on the paper.

Harry grumpily thanked the Healers before leaving the hospital but



while Riddle was in the bathroom Harry stuffed one of the pillows into his bag. Hospital pillows were ten times better than his flat, dirty, lumpy pillow in the apartment. And after last night's conversation, Riddle was going to probably fire him. He didn't have the money for pillows. He pretended he didn't see Riddle watching the overstuffed bag in confusion.

"Well, I torpedoed any chance I had with him."

"What happened?" Martinez asked as they turned to another street.

It was nighttime, Pike and Martinez had just finished work and Harry had today free as his only day to recuperate after the hospital. They were walking aimlessly looking for a new place to eat since tacos were now off the menu until Harry can stand the thought without nausea. Harry yawned loudly. He slept all day and still felt tired.

"I was talking about a Christmas movie and before I knew it we were talking about the future and relationships."

"A Christmas movie?" Pike asked incredulously. "First off, why the fuck were you watching a Christmas movie when it's not even season. That's the important question."

Harry waved away the comment. "Shitty hospital cable," he dismissed. "It was either that or a re-run of that stupid knock-off 007 movie. And it drives me crazy to see him waving his wand like a drunk four-year-old and somehow create a first-level ward on the first try."

"Yeah, it's a stupid movie," Pike agrees. "He somehow falls off a cliff, escapes a burning building, swings off a branch like fucking Tarzan, and befriends a wolf and it's not even the first minute of the movie. But a Christmas movie? How the hell do you ruin your chances at a relationship with a Christmas movie?" Pike asked looking way too entertained for Harry's taste.

"Fuck if I know. By being stupid, I guess. I was criticizing the movie... to be honest, not really paying attention to what I was babbling. The man is in bed with me looking sexy as fuck and I was trying to not be a fucking creep." Harry sighed. "One thing led to another and he was asking all these questions and I was answering thinking he was speaking in general, you know? Or about the movie. And it's after I put my foot in my mouth that the light bulb turns on that maybe...just maybe, this is not hypothetically speaking." Harry sighed sadly. "But at

least it's out in the open. He knows I'm not looking for a relationship, just sex and it's not what he wants. Which, to be fair, I already knew. We had more than enough chances and didn't." And not from lack of Harry dropping hints. Or you know, point blank asking the man if office sex was something he was interested.

"We knew it wasn't his style from day one when he tried to wine and dine you without taking your pants off at the door. You just wanted sex more than to clarify that point," Pike remarked as he pointed to a Mexican car with burritos. Harry scrunched his face in distaste. Too close to the smell of tacos.

"Yes, well. Now it's crystal clear thanks to a fucking Christmas movie. At least I can continue my job semi-normally." Maybe. If he isn't fired at the first offense. He'll have to be the perfect assistant and give no reason for dismissal.

"You are almost too stupid to function in normal society if you believe that," Pike commented with unholy glee. Martinez hit Pike over the head.

"I want to hope," Harry clarified.

"Don't listen to him," Martinez said with a warning glare at a cackling Pike. "You did the right thing, Harry. He asked and you answered honestly, it's all anyone can do. Sometimes the right person comes along at the wrong time."

Harry snorted. Right person, yeah right. Riddle had a pattern. Find a victim, make them fall in love and then leave them. On and on and on for the last three years and probably longer. Each one of them thought they were the exception. They weren't. Harry wouldn't be either. He'd be a fool to believe that.

Sex? Yes, please.

Anything else? No.

He was too old to play games in relationships. If it wasn't going anywhere it wasn't worth starting it. Even if he trusted the man's word, which Harry didn't, Harry was going to travel the world and Riddle was going to be the next Minister. Long-distance wasn't something he wanted. Don't start a relationship with an expiration date was the barest of courtesies. He's not that pressed for sex that he'd lead someone on.

"You should have had sex with him when you could," Pike insisted.

"Well if I had sex with him and then broken it off I might have been looking for an apartment in Bogota so it's a good thing at least one of us had control. As of now, he seems to want to ignore me. Except that he forgets and goes back to joking with me, then remembers, gets mad at himself, and storms off."

"He's not the only one that seems crushed with the new-normal," Pike said.

"It was just a tiny crush. The attention was flattering. I'll get over it," Harry shrugged as they passed another posh Italian Restaurant. Fucking Draco Malfoy.

"Remember your last tiny crush? You carried that torch like an Olympic Champion for years."

"You talking about Lavander Brown?" Martinez asked Pike curiously. Harry rolled his eyes.

"Who else? He took dancing lessons for a year for Christ's sake."

"For three years actually," Harry corrected. What can he say? Lavender was always horny after dancing lessons and she was a bomb-ass sexy woman with confidence for miles.

"She married that dude from your class? The dorky one?"

"Yeah. I'm a good luck charm to finding your one true love. Every woman I've dated married the next guy."

"At least this weekend you'll be able to let go and find someone to have sex with without Riddle watching over your shoulder."

Harry scratched the back of his neck nervously. "Oh. Yeah. Haha. Um. About that." Harry used the opportunity of seeing Lucius Malfoy on the other side of the road to wave at the man and not keep talking. Malfoy senior frowned at Harry and raised his hand marginally. A miracle. Harry was now someone Worth Acknowledging.

Pike stopped walking. "What? You flaking on me, Potter?"

"Noooo. In fact, um, I have good news! I bought all of us VIP tickets to meet the band! AND a banging all-inclusive ski resort to stay the weekend. All paid."

"Potter..." Pike began angrily. "You don't have a pound to your name. Who paid for that?"

Harry couldn't help cringing at the question. "Riddle."

Martinez sighed like a deeply disappointed parent. "He's going with us, isn't he?"

"...yeah... and a few other people."

"What the fuck, Potter?"

"Who?" Martinez asked curiously. Harry gave the highlights of how he ended up in that situation carefully editing the story to seem as blameless as possible.

Pike turned thoughtful. "Can we ditch them?"

"I mean, yeah, probably," Harry said, lying through his teeth. They were going by bus to the same ski resort Friday night, to the same concert, in the same VIP area, and coming back to the same resort to eat in the same restaurant. Already paid! But yeah. "We can pretend they don't exist and we don't know them."

"Ok, ok. Not too terrible then. Good hustling, Potter. And with your ass intact. I'm impressed. It's going to be awesome. I'll pack my gear and we can hit the mountains Saturday morning."

Harry laughed nervously and agreed. Awesome. It was going to be...awesome. No need to worry. They were adults. Adults adulting. Both of them. Almost a century old each. Peak adulthood. And Riddle can handle rejection gracefully. Probably. He seemed cordial the morning after. And it's not that it was even a rejection. Just a talk. And Harry won't make things weird anymore because they Talked. And Cleared the Air. Like adults. There won't be misunderstandings or hurt feelings. They'll be buddies. Best of buddies. Work buddies at least. It won't be weird at all. Or at least, Riddle won't know Harry was being weird about it.

"I mean, we are not teenagers anymore, right? So it should be fine." Harry looked at Martinez that looked at Pike, that looked at the dark sky and neither responded.

"Maybe a bit weird at the start," Harry conceded. "But it will all level out and we'll laugh about it in a few months."

Pike's face spasmed in an attempt to agree.

Harry laughed nervously. "For sure in a few years it'll be a funny story to tell at the Christmas work party. Remember that time we almost dated? What a fucking nightmare that would have been? And everyone will agree and laugh."

"Pizza?" Pike asked.

"Yeah, pizza sounds nice," Martinez almost tripped over his words with how quickly he responded. Harry looked at them suspiciously but slowly agreed to pizza.

It'll be fine.

Surely.

No need to stress about it.

Friday's workday started without someone waiting for him outside the floo with a coffee cup and an invitation for breakfast. Harry pretended he didn't notice the change when he eventually found Riddle already in his office. Riddle gave him no instructions for the day.

Harry stood awkwardly for half an hour before deciding to make himself useful and went to find problems to solve. Except...he didn't know how to solve most problems. Or any problem really. He had niche areas of specialty, ok? And no one was asking him for help with a ritual or to solve a murder. He wasn't Riddle's bodyguard either, even if he was on the lookout for any suspicious activity that might prolong his workday. For a moment he wondered if he could actually do this job with zero experience.

Thankfully other people existed.

"Harry dear, you should have taken the day off!" Greta said in greeting. "You were very brave, as always, I'm sure. No matter what that article said. I haven't forgotten how you saved me from someone using my face and name to hurt Mr. Riddle. I still have nightmares of finding myself in prison unjustly," she shivered theatrically.

"You know I wouldn't leave you like that. Say, Greta, do you by any chance know something about this? I just can't make heads or tails of it." Harry showed her his latest conundrum as an assistant.

"I don't Harry pie, but John from second used to do that a few years back. He could help and he owes me a favor. Just mention I sent you." John from second did help.

So that's what he did the entire day. Study the next meeting's agenda, look for problems and ask other people's opinions on what the solution would be. When the problem was brought out in a meeting, Harry already had the solution. He's been in the Ministry long enough to know most people and he used all the connections he had. Riddle looked at him weirdly the third time Harry had the perfect solution to a problem and Harry smiled happily at the man.

Mission: be the perfect assistant running smoothly. It was just like undercover Auror work. He had his mission, his goals, and the single-minded focus to ace his part using all the resources available.

"Mr. Malfoy," Harry called for Draco in between meetings, "A moment if you can." Draco stopped while everyone else went ahead. Riddle didn't even look at him to see if Harry was following him back to the office. Ouch. "This ceremony seems to be scheduled for next month, but I can't find any plans for it. I think no one is working on it."

"That's not my job. That's your job. Why should I help you with that, Potter?"

Harry looked at him blankly. "You seem to have forgotten that you are currently not in a cell being questioned for an assassination attempt thanks to me."

Draco lost his smile. "You want to use your only favor for this?"

"Yes." Harry hadn't planned on it, but if it is the only way then yes. "If you please, make sure everything is perfect for that ceremony. It needs a venue, food, music, and decoration." If he was going to use his favor on it then Draco will have to do it all.

Draco scoffed. "That's the stupidest use of a favor. It's not even worth considering."

Harry sighed, grabbed Draco's shoulder, and unloaded three years of pent-up frustrations. "Malfoy...Draco...kid, listen to me. Have you ever lived in a place where your next-door neighbor lets himself get possessed by a demon periodically because the demon version of himself can hold a job, stay sober and be an actual fucking father to his kid? And dead bodies keep appearing in front of the complex because there's a fucking demon who doesn't understand to dump the

bodies in the river no matter how many times you explain that the Auror clean-up process is backlogged and it takes more than 12 hours and the body starts to smell? Most of the time the body is bloated and leaking by the time they clean up. Can you imagine coming home every day to that smell? No? Then don't fucking tell me what I should use my favors on."

Draco's eyes were as wide as saucers and his mouth was open. "You are a lunatic, Potter. Why the hell haven't you reported your neighbor?"

Harry waved the question away like it was insignificant. "Because the demon doesn't bang the walls and screams in a drug-induced haze. He also takes out the trash on time, it's polite, we have way fewer breaks-in now, and rent is on an all-time low. The wife and kid are also happier. Don't worry too much about it."

Draco did not seem to understand what in Harry's opinion were good, solid points. "Don't ask me anything else. Even better, don't talk to me anymore."

"He only kills pedophiles and child murderers if it's any consolation," Harry screamed to his back. Draco walked faster away from him.

Harry took out his notepad and checked that ceremony off. "At least that's taken care of."

Harry anxiously pulled the strap of his weekend bag as he waited outside the Ministry for the bus. He looked at his watch. 6:50pm. It was almost time. He pulled his robe around him as a cold breeze hit him. He was still in his work clothes; a frumpy almost-serious sweater of meh-quality, black slacks, and a wizard's simple black robe. Not his best, not his worst, but he didn't pay much attention to it either. It's not like he had disposable income to afford to care.

A quick glance confirmed that nearly everybody had arrived. Harry nodded in greeting to the Australian politician that had started this mess that somehow snowballed into a work event. Harry had already forgotten his name. Secretary of defense something-something, wasn't it? Hopefully, it doesn't come up. A blond head caught his attention. Draco was still avoiding him.

"Stop being creepy," Martinez reproached. Liliana snickered.

Harry glared at him instead. "I'm not being creepy."

"You have a documented past of obsessing with Malfoy with little to no reason."

Harry made an indignant sound. "I'm not obsessing. He is just a wormy worm that provokes me into squishing him."

Martinez sighed, long-suffering and not at all sympathetic.

"What did he do?" Liliana asked like a trooper. Harry liked her. She was in her late forties with an athletic build, brown hair and eyes, a mischievous face, and the kind of person that could be your guide through the literal fires of hell and make you feel like you are just a tourist with a camera.

"He decided he was too good to talk to me."

"Don't skimp on the details. Tell her why Mr. Malfoy, very reasonably might I add, decided not to approach you with a ten-foot pole,"



Martinez ordered with a judging glance.

"He was being discriminatory...of my housing."

Liliana frowned, "Don't you live with Pike?"

"No...I live in Vomit Alley."

"Ah," She looked at Martinez in an obvious plea for help, but soldiered on. "Isn't...well, isn't that where they kidnap people like once a week?"

"Yeah. It used to be a real problem since they target kids. But it doesn't happen anymore. We, um, got new security."

"Like cameras?" She tried hopefully if a bit naively.

"Hmm, yeah... something like that."

Liliana nodded. "Don't ask questions about the suspicious new security. Got it. I've also heard that they find a lot of bodies there."

Harry cleared his throat nervously. Yeah, he was getting Martinez's point. "We are up to at least one per day," Harry reluctantly confirmed. Martinez raised one judging eyebrow. "And you still wonder why Malfoy might feel unsafe with you."

"Are you ok?" Liliana asked with a worried frown. "I have a couch. It's not the most comfortable couch, but it's also not ...Vomit alley."

"He's fine," Martinez answered for him. "Don't worry about him."

"Yeah, I'm fine, that's not the point; the point is that slime ball of undeveloped parental privilege has no right to judge me and decide he's too good to talk to me."

"Where's Pike? It's almost time," Martinez interrupted without care.

"He's getting coffee and snacks," Harry responded, not really offended about the interruption. His heart wasn't really into bashing Malfoy but it was a good distraction as any.

"Tell me again why we didn't floo?" Liliana complained.

"Too far," Harry responded.

"Harry gets nauseous," Martinez said at the same time.

Harry stared at Martinez and blinked slowly. "It's just more comfortable for everyone this way," Martinez amended soothingly.

"It would have been one entire hour inside a chimney inhaling fumes and unable to take breaks," Harry defended with a huff, throwing one more glare at Martinez. Martinez nodded sagely and smiled knowingly at Liliana when Harry looked away.

"But the bus ride will be eternal," Liliana pouted.

"It's that Lavander from your class? I didn't know she worked in the Ministry." Martinez wondered. Harry looked back curiously.

"What? Where?" Harry followed his line of sight to see her standing with a pink backpack and a small suitcase talking animatedly to Padma Patil who also didn't work in Politics. "Huh. So it is." Their eyes met and Harry greeted her with a hand wave. Lavender pointed him out to Padma and they made their way over to them. "I suggested her to Riddle as a good ambassador to promote his project. I guess he took the suggestion? Would it be too rude to ask?"

"Yeah, don't ask," Martinez advised.

"But I didn't include them in the headcount. Will they have rooms?" Harry worried.

"Let the person that invited them worry about it."

Harry hummed in agreement. He could always give them his bed if needed and sleep with Pike on their two-bed room. Harry introduced the group to each other and let Martinez and Liliana carry the conversation while Harry nodded along.

"Who is that?" Harry asked with a frown as he saw Riddle exiting the Ministry with a bombshell on his arm. As one the group turned to see Riddle. Nice and discreet, just like Harry wanted. He glared at the backs of their oblivious heads.

"Oh, that's Lucy," Lavander said, as the literal definition of a goddess walked toward them. "She's the third daughter of St Mungus' owner. They broke up a while ago. It seems like they got back together? Weird that the papers didn't mention it this morning."

"Lucy, Huh? She's beautiful," Harry reluctantly admitted. Even that seemed like understating it. She was flawless caramel skin and silky curls on a perfume commercial that advertised peerless beauty.

"Isn't she?" Lavender responded breathlessly, "She has won best smile five years in a row. She's also really smart. Like certified genius."

Harry smiled at Riddle. It probably wasn't a nice smile. Petty ass man playing petty ass games. If Riddle wanted to invoke some sort of jealousy he had to work harder than that. Harry turned away from Riddle and changed the subject. The bus arrived just in time, thank god, and it gave Harry the flimsy excuse to not greet Riddle even as he felt Riddle's piercing stare.

Harry led the group to the last row of the bus. As they got comfortable Harry used the opportunity to complain. (With a well placed silencing charm on their corner and his back to Riddle that seemed adept at reading lips).

"I mean, rude. You at least wait a week before moving on. To at least pretend you gave a fuck."

"He's just trying to make you jealous," Pike said as he passed the beverages and snacks he brought.

Harry stuffed his second-hand bag into the upper compartment and fell to the seat like a rock. "I feel like a spoiled old man," he lamented. "I use to be able to sleep on rocks, now I want a mattress that supports my back, soft cotton sheets, and a perfectly bouncy pillow with good neck support. And I specifically don't want this drama. I wanted mediocre vanilla sex for a weekend and a funny story to tell. I don't want this shit."

Martinez patted his back without an ounce of pity as he distributed the pastries.

Harry opened the to-go lid of his coffee and aggressively shoved three packets of sugar. He created a tornado with the wooden stick and tasted it, immediately cringing. It was overly sweet and ruined. His mood plummeted further.

"We are old, Harry," Martinez reminded him. "Maybe it's time you stopped looking for adventures and settle down."

"We are not old," Liliana argued. They acknowledged the comment as valid from her point of view and ignored it.

"Yeah, but I felt young, you know? But seeing him trying to stir drama reminds me that I spent an hour last week comparing the arch support of two pairs of sneakers."

"And ended buying none," Pike was quick to remind him with an annoyed glance. "But aren't you a bit jealous?" Pike prodded.

Harry narrowed his eyes. "You are enjoying this aren't you?"

Pike tried to hide his excitement for a second before giving up, "I'm living for the drama."

"Jealous of what?" Harry asked irritated as he snapped the coffee lid back on. "Stress?" He dumped the used sugar packets and mover into the bag and grabbed a croissant. "The emotional work that that woman has to do to be able to keep his attention for five consecutive minutes?" Riddle hadn't stopped looking back since they got on the bus. To be fair, casting a silencing charm on a bus full of wizards draws a lot of attention. Harry bit half the croissant and pointedly did not look to the front of the bus. "Fuck that. Or maybe he moved on in 36 hours. I mean, great for him if it's that. If he gives zero fucks then so can I. In fact, I can give negative fucks. I'll walk him down the damn aisle and gift him a cheap toaster on his wedding day." Harry shoved the rest of the croissant to his mouth and downed it with bad, overly sweet coffee.

"Who is he talking about?" Liliana asked Martinez. And then when Martinez did not respond, she asked Harry, "Who are you talking about?"

"Riddle," Pike answered as he devoured half a donut.

"Riddle...? Tom Riddle? As in your boss?" She asked with clear skepticism. She looked at Martinez and then at Harry doubtfully and maybe a bit pitifully. "Are you sure he was interested? I mean, I don't mean to doubt you but he is a friendly man, you wouldn't be the first one that got the wrong impression."

Pike raised an eyebrow, Martinez coughed to hide a laugh, but no one corrected her.

"Yeah, probably," Harry agreed, even if Riddle was as far from friendly as one can get without talking about ducks and demons. He wasn't in

the mood to explain, and a tiny, insecure part of him felt that he had maybe misunderstood something after all. It made him wonder if they had been talking about the movie or hypotheticals after all. He had been tired at the hospital; it was not unfathomable that he misunderstood. They hadn't had sex, kissed, or even held hands. What made him think Riddle was even interested?

"Why do you care anyway? " Pike asked with a pointed look. "You are not interested, right?"

"I don't and I'm not," Harry immediately answered without a doubt.

"Buuuut?"

"I guess my pride is bruised. This is the first person showing interest in a while. It was fun and flattering and I knew it was fleeting but man, it prickles that the interest was as deep as a teacup plate."

"Dude he hurt your pride? You told someone that has no family, no friends, no partner, or even peers that yeah, technically you have a soulmate but fuck you, not my problem."

"Man, now you are making me feel bad. Don't do that. This is Riddle we are talking about. We don't pity Riddle."

"Because he's a two-dimensional character that can only be evil?" Pike challenged.

"Knock, knock, knock, can we enter the conversation yet?" Lavender asked from outside the barrier. Harry waved the silencing charm away, 90% in part to avoid answering.

"Yeah, yeah, I'm done with my pity party," Harry said and offered Lavender his coffee in apology.

"You sure?" She asked before taking the coffee.

"Yeah, too sweet for me."

She smiled as she tasted it, "thanks, Harry."

"Why are you having a pity party?"

"I have bad taste in partners. I see red flags and use them as capes to live out my Little Red Riding Hood fantasies," Harry deadpanned. They laughed. As they should, his life was a tragic comedy only fit to entertain his friends.

"Don't feel too bad," Lavender said. "A boyfriend once stopped me from applying for Head Designer at Marquis boutique in London because he was afraid of me prioritizing my work over him. And not only I didn't apply, but I also stayed with him for over a year."

Padma snorted, "Well, I don't want to brag... but I once dated a man that hated my religion and culture."

Harry winced, "ouch. What happened?"

"I want to say I realized my worth and dumped him... but he dumped me a year later... and I begged him to stay."

"Damn."

"Twenties are a dumpster fire of bad decisions for everyone," Liliana agreed.

"Speak for yourself, I have no age limit on my bad decisions," Harry responded sourly.

"So...if you don't mind me asking, what red flags were you ignoring?" Lavender asked with hawk eyes.

Harry debated about responding. One way or another, Riddle will hear about this... but so what. "It was a fucking carnival of red flags but I think the biggest one is not respecting boundaries. In part it's my bad, I should have been firmer, you know? But fuck people that pressure you into agreeing. Boundaries are hard enough with normal people without trying to date boundary stumping bulls."

"Yeah, that's important," they agreed and kept talking about relationship red flags, and thankfully he wasn't put in the spot again.

Hours later, when the bus was dark and quiet from everyone sleeping or quietly reading he felt Riddle's presence approach. Harry scrunched his nose and frowned as he partially woke up in annoyance.

"He seems cold," Harry heard Riddle say as he felt a coat cover him. Harry huffed at the audacity but pulled the coat over his face and fell back to sleep in moments.

"Huh," Liliana slapped Martinez's shoulder after Riddle left. "Next time George, I'd appreciate it if you shove a donut on my mouth when I'm

making a fool of myself."

"Yes, dear."

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It was almost midnight when they arrived and Harry was woken up by a push on his shoulder. He cleaned the drool from his face and shuffled out of the bus with his bag and Riddle's jacket in hand. The ski resort looked even better than in the pictures. It was the perfect mix of a homey cabin and a high-class hotel. Harry felt a thrill of happiness and excitement for the weekend.

"The restaurant is closed but we are leaving our stuff in the room and going to the bar. You want to join or are you heading for bed?" Martinez asked.

Harry almost broke his jaw with his yawn but nodded. "I'm in." They went to the concierge to check in and get their room keys.

"What do you mean we have no reservation? We were invited," Lavander said trying her best to keep her voice down but noticeably flustered.

"We'll just pay for a room," Padma said.

"What do you mean there are no more rooms?"

"All booked?"

Harry looked at Pike asking for his opinion. Pike shrugged his shoulders uncaringly.

"Hey," Harry called out to the girls, "don't worry. You can just room with us. Our room fits four people."

"Are you sure?" Lavender asked as she fidgets with her wallet.

"We can check nearby places," Padma assured them.

"Nah, don't worry about it. It's late," Pike reassured them. "We don't plan to sleep much anyway. Full plans for the weekend. I have to warn you, Potter snores."

"I do," Harry admitted with a shrug. Harry left Riddle's jacket with one of his many minions for it to make it back to its owner and left with the group for their room.

The room had a standard layout of two queen-sized beds, a desk, and an on-suit with a jacuzzi and a separate shower.

"This is beautiful," Lavender gushed as she left her bags on the bed to the right and went to open the curtains. "We have the view of the mountains!" She exclaimed. "Thanks so much for letting us crash here. I'm not sure what happened to our reservation. The invitation said it was all arranged. I even spoke to Mr. Malfoy in person."

"Mr. Malfoy? Draco?" Harry asked as he set his bags and sat on the bed to the left.

"No, his father. I'm not sure why he invited us."

"Uh. I think I might be to blame. I mentioned your name to Mr. Riddle."

She looked gobsmacked. "You mentioned my name to Mr. Riddle? Why?"

Harry frowned in confusion. "Mr. Malfoy didn't explain? They have this big proposal that they are mucking up because none of them can sell a glass of water to a man dying of thirst. It also probably sucks."

Lavender looked panicked. "No one said anything! What proposal? I know nothing about it!" She despaired. "This is a damned secret interview weekend and I was planning on spending it too drunk to function."

"I told you nothing is free," Padma chipped in.

"I thought sex!" She wailed.

"Narcissa would have your head and Lucius' on display in her favorite tea room. That man knows not to stray from the straight and narrow path."

"This is worse. I'm not prepared. MY WARDROBE IS ALL WRONG."

"Don't worry about it. You'll do great. I suggested you because I know you are the best for this. I have the proposal in my bag and tonight everyone will be too tired to care much about talking shop."

"Give it," Lavender demanded. Harry opened his bag and handed them. "You have not read this have you?" She said when she saw the perfectly new pages.



"Eh. I meant to give it a read on the bus." After much convincing Lavendar left the papers and they shuffled to the bar. The bar was packed as everyone had the same idea.

The bar's main entrance was on the first floor just to the left of the lobby. The first floor had the bar, tables, booths, and music and the mezzanine had a pool table and typical bar games.

"The children's table is over there," Snape sneered as they approached the bar.

"I'm glad you know where to go, Severus Always-Second-Place Snape," Pike responded without missing a beat, and Harry, too tired to care about keeping the peace, laughed. Snape's face soured and his eyes turned vicious.

"He has the personality of rotten avocado, doesn't he?" Harry remarked as they walked away from the man.

"You insult the avocado."

Distracted with Snape he did not notice until it was too late that Riddle was behind him. "Harry, there you are. I want you to meet Lucy Walsh, she's the Head Healer at St. Mungus. Lucy, this is my assistant, Harry Potter."

"Assistant? It's a pleasure. Tom talks great things about you. I'm sure he has also told you all about me."

Harry nodded, smiled, and shook her hand. "All great things," he responded but she was already distracted greeting someone else, before turning to him. "Harry, would you mind taking our bags to the room?"

Harry's smile froze and his eyes found Pike's before his customer service smile reappeared full force and he responded affirmatively. Riddle frowned at Lucy's back.

"You don't have to do that, Harry."

"It's no trouble," Harry said taking the bags from the floor and silently asking for the key while avoiding eye contact with Riddle. Lucy gave him the key and without wasting a second more he turned for the room.

"You are pathetic, Harry Potter," Harry whispered when he was alone. "This is not worth a new apartment." Riddle and Lucy's room was on the other side of the resort and easily twice as large as his room with a large king-size bed with rose petals forming a heart on top. Cute. From the door, Harry threw the bags to bed. They landed heavily and bounced a few times, the petals landing in sad disarray on the floor. Before he left he swiped the wine from the wine cooler.

A spell had the bottle open and he managed to drink half the bottle before getting back to the bar. Harry saw Pike wave at him from the mezzanine and made his way there to see Pike and Martinez playing pool, beers on hand. Lavender, Liliana, and Padma were watching from a nearby table. Harry showed Pike his loot.

"Nice. The good stuff," Pike complimented without asking questions about where Harry got a vintage wine that costs more than an entire year of salary. Harry felt a swell of affection for his friend. "I love you man."

"Don't be gross," Pike responded and offered him a beer, a declaration of love in his language.

"Want to play?" Martinez offered.

"Nah, I'll get the next one," Harry said as he sat with the girls.

"You, eh, want a glass with that?" Padma asked. Harry brought the bottle to his lips. "No."

"Harry, I've been wondering...why did you recommend me for this job?"

Harry blinked and focused on her blurry face. Wow, this wine was strong. Harry looked at the bottle. Ah, it was almost empty. That would do it. "Because you are the best," he responded honestly and a little confused. Why wouldn't he recommend her? She's the best.

"Harry, I work in fashion."

"Yeah, so? You are great at selling and you have a talent with people."

Lavender brightened, "You think so?"

Harry smiled goofily, "I know so."

"So, Harry what have you been up to this past few years? We've hardly

heard from you since you left Hogwarts," Padma asked.

"Nothing much. Worked in the Communications department until recently and now I got promoted to Mr. Riddle's assistant. I plan on doing that until I finish my Masters in Curse Breaking."

"Wow, that's impressive Harry. But surprising," Padma responded with a confused smile. "No offense, but I thought you'd be the least likely to continue higher education."

"I like challenges."

"That makes sense," Lavender agreed with a quick frown at Padma for her comment. "You were always competitive in Quidditch and quick to learn the hard spells. And besides, not all of us are traditional learners. I'm more hands-on myself."

"How did you manage to get in without finishing Hogwarts?" Padma questioned.

"Martinez helped me qualify for an exception to take final exams from Ilvermorny."

It occurred to Harry that this was the first time he had to explain himself to people that knew him, the original him, before the accident. Up until now they hadn't mentioned any difference in personality or asked anything he couldn't answer.

"This is my favorite song!" Lavender exclaimed happily. Her body slowly swayed in the chair.

Harry looked at her fondly, "Want to dance?" He asked without thinking about it. Lavender looked surprised but happily agreed. Harry took her hand and slowly swayed with her as the deep voice recalled fond memories of the past with his lover. Harry knew this song inside out and had danced to it with this same woman countless times. Harry let her go as the melody calmed and finally stopped.

"I'm going to sleep now," Harry told her. Enough of reminiscing about the past. "I'm tired from the long day."

"We are going to head out," Lavender said to the group, surprising Harry.

"Harry," Riddle called as they went down the stairs. "Come. The chef agreed to cook something simple and I know you haven't had dinner."

Harry was opening his mouth to say no when Lavender made a sound. It was her hum of interest. "You hungry?" Harry asked her.

She looked sheepish. "A bit. But I have snacks in my bag."

Harry nodded to Riddle, "Let's go." Riddle didn't immediately move. His eyes were locked on Lavender with a blank expression.

Harry took one step forward and it prompted Riddle to move. The four walked in awkward silence to the restaurant. There was only one table prepared for three. The only waiter present quickly added another plate and chair. Lavender gave him a nervous glance and Harry silently agreed. He too was regretting coming.

Lucy broke the silence and started asking general get-to-know-you questions. Harry responded with brief answers but Lavender kept the conversation going without difficulty. He felt Riddle's piercing stare but Harry's attention was on Lavender. Lucy was unknowingly doing the hard work for him and he was getting to know this younger, less jaded Lavender. Without a war, she had flourished in different ways. Neither better nor worse, just a different person. Food was burgers and Harry dug in with enthusiasm. Lucy broke his trance by addressing him.

"Harry I must apologize to you. You must think me a brute. When Tom presented you as an assistant, I mistakenly assumed your role to be similar to my assistant. Tom here was furious," she said with a conspiring smile to an unsmiling, unamused Riddle. "It appears I overstepped, and for that, I apologize."

Harry smiled and wished he were anywhere but here. "No worries. Mr. Riddle was probably being a grump about having to pay me overtime," Harry winked at Riddle and received a lukewarm smile from the man in response.

The waiter offered them two options of dessert.

"You allergic are to nuts, right?" Harry confirmed with Lavender.

"Wow, Harry, I'm impressed that you remember."

"It's not impressive," Riddle sniped with surprising vehemence. "Harry remembers the most inconsequential details from even strangers."

Lavender looked uncomfortable for a second before forcing a smile.

"What other things do you remember?" Lavender asked to diffuse the tension.

"Ummm. Let me see. You love to dance."

"That's easy, everyone knows that."

Harry pretended to think hard. "That your Nan is your favorite person."

"Also easy."

"That you love chocolate." Lavender was opening her mouth to probably tell him how easy that was but Harry continued over her, "but eat vanilla because it reminds you of home."

Her mouth clicked shut. "Is that your superpower Harry?" She asked instead.

"Don't be silly, it's my hand-eye coordination. That's what the Gods decided to bless me with."

"You two are so cute," Lucy gushed. "How long have you been together?"

"Ah."

"Um."

"We are not. Just old classmates," Lavender clarified. An uncomfortable silence followed.

"Do you want that dessert to go?" Harry asked her. Lavender immediately got up and started saying their goodbyes. Lucy and Riddle tried to entice them to coffee or digestif but Lavender ruthlessly shut it down citing the late hour. Harry waved goodbye and a waiter caught up to them at the door to hand them their almost forgotten dessert. The doors closed with a bang.

"Was it me or was that not just horrible?" Lavender exploded.

Harry agreed as they made their way back to the room.

She touched her belly. "I have indigestion. I mean she didn't even let me swallow between one question and the next. It's true what they

say about meeting your heroes. She was *intense*."

Harry hummed in agreement, which caused Lavender to give him a side-glance and comment, "Not that you had any problem eating. You ate half of my chips," she accused.

"I was hungry," Harry defended with a smile.

"Is it always like that?" She asked nervously, "Because if it is, thanks for the opportunity but I'm just not cut out for that. Did you see how Mr. Riddle was looking at me?"

Harry frowned, "how was he looking at you?"

"Like he hated me, and my ancestors, and my ancestor's ancestors. I almost developed a tail and went back to sea under that stare."

"Ah, yeah, he does that sometimes. Don't worry about it. You get used to it."

Lavender looked at him oddly. "You don't fear him?"

"You do? He's not that bad. More bark than bite." For the most part.

"I don't know. He just gives me this bad gut feeling. I know it's silly, but every time I get close he gives me the creeps. Like 'trap you in the basement and torture you' vibes." She laughed. "Isn't that silly?"

"It's always important to listen to your gut feeling."

"But it's Mr. Riddle, you know? The man is practically a legend in our world. He would never..." Harry kept his silence and did not offer empty platitudes. "Would he?"

"Lavender, no matter who they are, listen to your gut feeling. That's your superpower."

"What does your gut say about him?"

"I mean, I dated my ex. I have reason to believe my gut is unreliable and/or attracted to crazy."

She threw her head back and laughed. Harry opened their door and held it open for her.

"Where were you guys?" Padma asked.

“Yeah, we wanted to catch you in the act.”

“Pfff. Like I’d ever let you. We were on the world’s most god awful double date.”

“It was. It truly was. I need a half-hour bath to get my shoulders to relax from their place warming my ears. Mr. Riddle and Lucy Walsh invited us to dine with them and I swear the heat from the undercurrent of messages was boiling me alive.”

“But the restaurant was closed?” Pike questioned as he took his pajamas from his bag.

“Yeah, I’m hungry. I could have put up with a bit of awkwardness for food,” Padma lamented

“Here, we brought dessert.” Harry threw the bag toward her. Harry took his toiletries to the bathroom as Lavender detailed their dinner from hell.

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Harry was the first to open his eyes. Pike was wrapped in a cocoon of blankets on the other side of the bed. While everyone else was still asleep he took the opportunity to use the bathroom. When he got out of the bathroom freshly showered and changed no one was showing signs of waking up.

“Pike,” Harry lightly touched his shoulder, “hey Pike, I’m heading for breakfast. Remember you wanted to hit the mountains early.” Pike mumbled and kept sleeping.

Harry happily opened the doors to the restaurant and immediately regretted ever opening his eyes this morning. Right at the center of the restaurant, with a clear view of the door, looking directly into his eyes was Riddle. Harry went to the buffet and stalled as much as he could. He debated fruit choices as if they were life or death before finally settling on pineapple.

"You've been avoiding me," Riddle said almost directly to his ear causing Harry to jump in guilty surprise. His pineapple rolled onto his eggs and Harry felt as if this was an omen for the rest of the day.

"Yeah. Maybe," Harry agreed.

"Stop it," the man ordered.

"Ok." This was his boss, it's not as if he could have continued avoiding him forever but was until Monday too much to ask?

"Come. Sit with me." Not that Harry and his pineapple-flavored eggs had any choice in the matter as Riddle took him by the elbow and deposited him in the chair to his right. To Riddle's left was Lucy that gave him a cheery hello, directly across was Snape who sneered at him, and on Snape's right and left were Crabbe and Goyle that glared at him with all the might of their two neurons combined. Peachy.

"Harry, what are your plans for the day?" Lucy asked.

"Skiing."

"Marvelous! We are too."

Marvelous. Simply...marvelous. Harry forced a smile in her direction.

It quickly went from uncomfortable to unbearable. No one was talking. Not even normal pass the salt shit. After excruciating long minutes with only the sound of silverware, Harry was ready to break the silence and offer himself as tribute.

"So... how is it going with the Australians?" Harry asked Riddle lamely.

"Potter, no one wants to hear your drivel this early in the morning," Snape drawled. There was a pregnant pause before Riddle very carefully set his silverware on top of his plate. Harry decided his pineapple-flavored eggs were the most god dammed interesting thing in the restaurant. He should trash the whole plate. Was that noise Snape's soul leaving his body? No. Nop. He wasn't looking up. Not his monkey, not his circus.

He shouldn't waste food. Harry took more careful bites and tried to build a wall with the bread to protect his eggs. Now his bread was pineapple-flavored. He didn't even like pineapple all that much. This morning had been filled with bad decisions. The first one was being



alive.

“It is slow going but we are seeing progress,” Riddle responded as if he hadn’t just shaved years off Snape’s life. “Mr. Walker has agreed to go over a few of the most controversial points today after lunch.”

“That’s good,” Harry commented lamely and the conversation died an inelegant death to keep in theme with this funeral of a breakfast.

“Excuse me,” Harry said as he got up. Riddle frowned at him.

“Coffee,” Harry said as an excuse.

Riddle’s face relaxed, “Bring me one too.”

“Oh, I’ll go get it for you,” Lucy offered happily, “I know how you like it,” she said with a mischievous smile and a wink.

Riddle didn’t even look from his plate. “Don’t bother. Harry also knows.”

“Oh. Ok,” she said as she sat down again. Harry left to avoid seeing Lucy’s crestfallen expression and felt a stab of pity for her. He couldn’t believe he had been annoyed with Riddle for moving on so quickly. He dodged a bullet. And was incredibly thankful not to be in her shoes.

Harry tried to stall as long as he could but could only spend five minutes preparing the coffee and bringing it to the table. And he was back again to the funeral atmosphere with a side dish of torture. At least it wasn’t his funeral. Snape wouldn’t look at him, his head bowed and no longer eating or moving. Was he lobotomized or something? Whatever had happened it had been quick and silent. Or maybe Riddle just looked at him sternly and Snape got the message? He could hope.

Harry finished every last bit of soggy eggs on his plate and every sip of coffee on his cup before he gave himself permission to leave the table. On his way out he vowed this would not happen again, his promise not to avoid Riddle now null and void.



They were waiting outside for their rental wear to arrive. Harry had left the group mingling to enjoy the view and the crisp air. Sadly, Riddle had followed him and stood close enough that he could feel the man's heat in the freezing morning. Harry did not have much experience, but he would say this was too close to be normal for a boss and his assistant. At least no one else joined them. Riddle's 'get close and die' overall demeanor might have had something to do with it. And the more tangible dark miasma Riddle was emitting like a radiator. Harry put it firmly in the 'Ignore it to be Happy' category and thought nothing else of it as the dark miasma waxed and waned around him. The view was nice.

Lucy was talking with Padma and Lavender but every now and then her eyes traveled to them. No one was close enough to hear them. Not that it mattered. Harry was silently watching the mountains and pretending he was alone... with variable success.

Finally breaking the impasse as if it physically pained him, Riddle talked. "I'm sorry about this morning. They'll learn to behave. One way or another," Riddle told him, his tone uncaring of whether they learned with or without incentives. Shot in one to the "not his problem" box.

Harry gave no signal that he heard; he was alone after all. Riddle turned fully towards Harry, his mouth inches from Harry's curly hair and moving the curls with his breath. "Harry, don't be difficult." It took more work to not react to that blatant provocation but Harry used the cold and the view to force inner calm in his soul. He imagined a lake without ripples.

"Come on, Harry," Riddle implored, putting a hand on his shoulder and making Harry tense, "it wasn't that bad and you defend yourself so beautifully." Harry felt Riddle's smile more than saw it. Felt Riddle's joy in his bones. Joy? Joy at what Harry wondered. Images flashed through his mind of the few and rare moments Harry would tear others apart from a third-person point of view.

His body betrayed his mind and without conscious thought, Harry turned his face towards Riddle, "You are horrible," Harry felt the need to remind the man and was answered by an almost blinding smile.

Harry chuckled, fascinated by how shamelessly disturbing this man

could be. But really, can you ask a crocodile not to crocodile?

"I'm way cuter than a crocodile," Riddle defended himself. Was this mental link getting stronger all of the sudden? Or Riddle getting better at controlling it? A problem for Harry of the future. He was on vacation and not going to ruin it with legilimency exercises.

"The same eyes though," Harry said as he watched the dark eyes of Tom Riddle wish to devour him without mercy. Why Harry spent time with this man was something of a mystery. Riddle was clearly on the border between sanity and insanity and doing a bad job of threading the line. Harry's smile gained an edge. "Well you fucked around, I hope you like the consequences."

Riddle's face blanked as if it has never known any expression. "What are you saying?" He demanded in a deadly whisper. If Harry were one of the 90% of the population he would have felt intimidated but he was grouped with the toddlers, the brain dead, and Alzheimer's patients and thus, felt no fear.

"You promised not to avoid me," Riddle guessed based on Harry's line of thinking.

"I won't avoid you, but I sure as hell will avoid them," Harry said as he pointed with his head at his merry group of murderers.

"Harry, I promise you that any disrespect will be handled immediately and harshly. No more games, I promise," Riddle vowed with his hands up and a smile that was all teeth and no substance. A crocodile smile. Harry nodded. Riddle's smile prematurely increased. "That's great at work when I have no choice but to be there."

Riddle sighed as if this conversation was burdensome. "You are being unreasonable."

Harry shrugged. "I don't care. I'm not asking your permission. I'm telling you what is going to happen." Riddle did not respond but Harry had no illusions that Riddle was agreeing or accepting, he was just thinking of how to ignore his wishes without inducing his wrath. Harry couldn't believe just last week he would have had sex with this man. Talk about bad decisions.

"Why did you invite Lavender?" Harry asked instead. It had been nagging him from the start.

Riddle looked at him with genuine confusion, "I did not invite her.

You invited her. She is your friend."

Harry frowned in confusion and fully turned to face Riddle. They were almost the same height but Harry had to turn his face slightly up since he was leaning on the railing. "I didn't invite her. Lucius Malfoy invited her. I thought by your request."

Riddle scoffed. "Why would I request her?"

Harry frowned. "I recommended her to you to promote the proposal."

Riddle made a displeased face. "And I told you I didn't need anyone else."

"Well fuck." He had gone and opened his big mouth and now Lavender thought this was an interview weekend. "Why did Lucius Malfoy invite her?" Harry wondered out loud. It certainly wasn't out of love.

"Don't worry," Riddle replied with malice, the dark miasma increasing in response. "I'll ask him."

Harry hummed, not caring about what might befall Lucius Malfoy and more worried about his motives. He turned towards the mountains as he thought of reasons. "I was talking about Lavender the other day," Harry mused out loud, Riddle looked at him with curiosity, "Malfoy was across the street, maybe he heard? And invited her to mess with me? It seems pointless but it's the only thing I can think about."

"What were you saying about her?"

"Nothing important really. Nothing I think Malfoy would find interesting. Reminiscing on the past."

"She must have been important to you. If you remember that much," Riddle said and Harry was finding it difficult to figure out the emotion behind that statement.

"I guess."

"She doesn't have any experience in politics or policies."

"None," Harry confirmed. "But she's good with people. Give her a chance. She's already here."

Riddle thought about it in silence and Harry turned his attention back to the mountains. "What are you going to give me in exchange?" Riddle asked.

Harry turn to face the man again. "Probably nothing. What do you want?"

"Your attention Harry."

Harry hummed. Neither agreeing nor disagreeing. Isn't that something he's doing already?

"No," Riddle responded firmly to his unspoken thought. "I want your entire attention."

Harry gave Riddle a disbelieving stare. "We work nine to five together. We used to have breakfast together before you canceled it and more than one dinner together. It is the weekend and we are together in a hotel. I'm not sure what more you want without swallowing me whole or carrying me around like a purse chihuahua."

Riddle looked to be contemplating the idea.

"You are NOT carrying me around like a purse chihuahua," Harry felt the need to clarify to the psychopath.

Riddle brightened at his next idea. "You can live with me."

Harry frowned, but also laughed at the ridiculous idea. "Like roommates?"

Riddle looked at him blankly, blinked, and then continued, "Yeah," he said after a pause. "...like roommates."

For a moment Harry thought about Riddle's bed fondly but there was only one answer. "No thanks."

"Why not? It'd be perfect. I'll always have you around."

Such a creep answer, Harry thought with amusement. "Until you get mad at me and change the locks. No thanks."

Riddle looked offended at the idea. "That would never happen."

"Yeah. No. You got mad at me, refused to tell me why, and canceled breakfasts." His free coffee train had ended as abruptly as it started. So sad. But it was coffee, not a whole ass apartment and suddenly facing homelessness.

"I didn't cancel breakfast," Riddle blatantly lied. Harry raised an eyebrow like dude I'm literally in your mind.

Riddle changed tracks. "It was a busy week. We'll continue as always on Monday."

Harry hummed noncommittally.

"How about neighbors?" Riddle tried instead.

"Are you looking to give me a raise? Cause I can't afford to be your neighbor otherwise."

"...My neighbor died. His apartment is selling really cheap."

Harry looked at Riddle with horror. "Oh my god, Gilbert died?"

Riddle blinked. "Who?"

Harry stared at him and slowly said, "Gilbert, your neighbor?"

"No, I mean the one on the other side."

Harry looked at Riddle. Riddle looked at Harry.

"...you have no other neighbor, you are a corner apartment... Please don't kill Gilbert."

Riddle made no promises. "I'll offer him a deal he can't refuse."

"...His life or the apartment?" Harry guessed with an unimpressed look.

Riddle blinked innocently. "He'd be silly to refuse."

"Are you paying the rent? And the utilities? Because I feel whorish...Not that will stop me... I just want to accurately feel the level of whorish I'm being."

"You have demonstrated abilities and talents beyond our original contract and I feel it is appropriate to compensate you fairly for your work. You doubled as a bodyguard when it was needed without complaint and without ever being asked and have gone above and beyond to ensure this proposal success. A proposal which you know nothing about except that it is important to me. It has nothing to do with..." and for the first time Harry could see Riddle at a loss for words describing their relationship, "...this," he said finally and made a vague gesture between them. "You are an asset that I want to secure."

"You do know if you died I would have had no job, right?"

"So? It continues to be the same. If I die and you have no job so it benefits you to be close and make sure I am alive. And it benefits me to be alive. Win, win." Well as long as Riddle was clear about Harry's reasons for saving him.

"And you are telling all of this now? Because I asked you about Lavender?" Harry asked in confusion. He totally deserved a raise but he was confused about the timing.

Riddle's face contorted in anger and something spiteful. "Miss Brown has nothing to do with this. I'm not a saint and I like to get what I want. Willingly if at all possible."

Harry's mouth opened and closed in confusion. Hadn't this conversation started because of Lavender? What part did he miss? But then he repeated Riddle's words in his mind. "...if at all possible," Harry said at loud slowly with narrowed eyes. Riddle looked unrepentant. Harry wanted to press on that issue. It was an important issue. But an apartment...A free apartment. He felt like a mouse considering the cheese in the mouse trap. Like how bad can it be? It couldn't be worse than what he had now could it?

"And you are not killing Gilbert?" Harry checked. Riddle opened his mouth but Harry continued over him. "It's kind of a dealbreaker if you kill him." Riddle closed his mouth.

"How do you even know my neighbor?" Riddle asked mulishly.

Harry raised an eyebrow. He hardly saw how that was relevant.

"I'll check if there are other empty apartments," Riddle reluctantly agreed. "Or maybe he's actually looking to sell. I'll...ask."

"I haven't yet agreed," Harry warned. "I want a binding contract in writing with all the details."

"And then you'll live with me?" Riddle asked excitedly. The dark miasma had long gone with Riddle's concentration diverted.

Harry looked at him with bemused confusion. He still wasn't clear on what he had done to win this obsessive creepiness but if it got him out of Vomit Alley, he wasn't too against it. A binding contract will protect him from Riddle's eventual mood change. "I'll live in the same building." Harry corrected as he pushed forward to gather his skiing



gear. Everyone else was geared up and they were the last ones.

Riddle hummed. Harry pretended he did not notice the lack of agreement.

"Creep," Harry called back.

Riddle smiled and it promised all sorts of dark things Harry pretended not to notice. "I'll stop when you stop liking it," Riddle called back, unable to not have the last word.

Harry was enjoying his day. The sun was bright, the sky was blue and cloudless, and the mountains white and crisp. Sure, breakfast had been hell and he's never touching a pineapple in this life or the next, but Riddle had more than made up for it. Harry was almost floating down the mountain in bliss. An apartment! In the best part of town! Just off Diagon Alley in a charming little street full of stores that shine with light at night. This second life was finally looking up. He had a good job, a nice apartment, best friends, and only a year left before graduation (maybe, if he could finish that thesis on time and successfully defend it but that was a problem for Harry of the future).

Yes, the bad column was...difficult (a nightmare he never would have imagined that has completely destroyed his fantasy of a perfect family and his self-esteem because why he was so hated by his caretakers that even basic human courtesy was difficult? He had siblings whom he'll never have a relationship with, his Godfather had abandoned him and unintentionally fulfilling his worst fear as a teenager that he was only substituting James in Sirius' life, the Weasley's only know him as his son's classmate, and he'll never have Ron and Hermione in his life), but he was looking at the bright side.

With his childhood, it was no surprise that he had no experience with skiing until well into adulthood and even that, he could count on his fingers the number of times he did it. But if he had any superpower it was to excel at sports and he lazily cruised down without a fear in his bones. A bit behind him and with different levels of skill, the group followed.

Thus he was the first one at the intersection. To his right, he could follow the chosen path, a perfectly safe and boring descent, but to the left...oh boy, a sharp drop-off with rocks at the bottom and just enough safe space to land followed by twisting pine trees and an almost vertical descent that will feel like flying. He couldn't see the end but knew it will be thrilling.

"Harry NO!" Pike shouted from close behind.

"What, you scared?" Harry cackled as he started picking up speed.  
"Race you to the end!"

"Fucking goddamit Potter!" Pike complained as he followed.

Harry did not hear the rest of it as the rush of air drowned everything. This could potentially be fatal without magic as plan B, Harry thought, as he hit terminal velocity and only just scrapped by the rocks. Harry smiled and whooped in happiness as the adrenaline hit like a sweet sweet drug his body craved. Pike's more panicked screaming just behind him. He looked behind to see Pike ungainly but safely land and his eyes widened to see Riddle follow behind with the aggressive intensity of a bird of prey.

"Oh shit."

"Look ahead, moron!" Pike shouted just in time for Harry to prevent smashing head-first into a tree. After that, it was a competition between him and the trees, and only decades of experience with rapidly changing direction saved him. He couldn't look back for even just a second to see how the others were holding up but he could hear Pike's screams of excitement fuelled by unadulterated fear and the sounds of exploding trees that he guessed was Riddle making a straight path instead of evading. The last drop-off was just enough for a flip so that's exactly what he did.

Harry wasn't feeling like landing on a pile of rocks so he pushed a bit of magic to just graze the rocks and land on soft snow. As much as he braced for the fall it was still rough and it took all of his years of experience to stay standing and skiing the last stretch until he slowly stopped. He took off his goggles laughing and sat down shaking from the adrenaline. He was so out of shape. His legs trembled like jelly at the unexpected exercise. Riddle landed soon after and Pike rolled in. Literally. Harry wheezed as he got his heart rate out of the heart attack zone while Pike looked over his injuries and healed his scrapes. Riddle didn't even look winded.

"I'm fucking leaving before you finally manage to kill me," Pike complained as he slowly righted himself.

Harry wheezed a bit harder in laughter. "There's always tomorrow," Harry continued their longtime running joke once he could speak.

Pike acknowledged Riddle with a nod and left, presumably for a bath. Harry understood, he also felt on the rancid side. That adrenaline sweat was no joke. And his jelly legs warned him to not even think about going at it again.

"What's the point of skis if you jump out of the side of the mountain?" Riddle questioned as he carefully sat next to where Harry was sprawled. Harry was distracted by the twigs in Riddle's hair and the honey hues that were only visible in the sun. To distract himself, he looked back at the mountain. There was a straight line of destruction through the forest and for some reason that was extremely funny.

"They should have the path better marked if I wasn't supposed to go there," Harry responded between laughs.

Riddle raised one eyebrow. "The view of a rocky cliff dropping to a vacuum is enough for most people."

"I've only done this a handful of times. I'm still not clear on the details." Harry was smiling goofily at his paltry excuses that wouldn't have fooled a toddler, but he was having fun.

After a long calming silence, Riddle looked at him. "You are happy...I hadn't realized you weren't before."

Harry felt as if a bucket of ice dropped on him. "I'm sorry," Riddle responded in what looked as genuine regret at killing the mood.

"It's fine." It was not. "Let's go back. We have to prepare for the lunch meeting that isn't a meeting but we are making it one anyway."

"Harry, if there's anything I can do..."

"It's fine." Harry was dealing with it. Poorly, for sure. But he was dealing with it and if anyone was to stick their spoon in it it was his therapist, his best friends, and that random dude at the 24-hour taco place he unloaded years of trauma during a low moment. But no one else. Rome wasn't built in a day and his mental health wasn't going to be solved by something Riddle can give.

"Ok," Riddle relented.

Lunch was a disaster in terms of the proposal. Even Lavender dressed in the most serious outfit she could scrounge couldn't make it any less uncomfortable. The Australian delegation couldn't have made their disdain any more obvious. Harry was not sure why they even agreed to sit down and talk about it.

In terms of lunch, it was great. Harry had a medium-well steak that was perfectly made, sautéed mushrooms with garlic and Mediterranean rice. Dessert was creme brûlée topped off with fresh berries and a tart berry sauce on the side. He had a cup of red wine that had a hint of sweetness and smelled divine. He lost the plot on any sort of conversation since the food arrived and it was only when the scrapped plates of dessert were taken that he regained any sort of consciousness. It was unfortunate that he blinked to existence to someone talking to him. Or at him.

"...very unusual that an assistant would have done and you have to forgive my skepticism and curiosity."

Harry hummed when the man paused and looked at him expectedly.

"Great, so you will do a demonstration then?"

Harry looked around the table to see everyone looking at him expectedly or in Riddle's case, long-suffering. *What?* He mentally shouted at Riddle in panic. Riddle, the literal evil incarnation, did not explain.

"What?" Harry repeated dumbly to the stranger talking to him.

"Harry, he wants you to do a demonstration," Lavender whispered in his ear.

*He thinks you went all out with the Japanese delegation to impress them and they are insulted you haven't tried anything with them besides this weekend trip.* Riddle filled in the blanks, apparently finally finding the goodwill to do it after Lavender spilled the beans.

*Did you learn to talk? But now that Harry was paying attention he could tell that Riddle wasn't talking like Harry talked. He was using memories of himself talking and piecing them together almost flawlessly. The amount of concentration that had to take was almost unbelievable.*

*Focus, Harry.*

*Harry's mind filled with variations of no, nope, no way, fuck off. I'm not a fucking performing monkey.*

*Please, Harry if this wasn't important I wouldn't humor it. I've worked on this for most of the year. They are already possessed to say no. Whatever you do can't worsen our odds.*

*-Wanna bet? I'm a fucking Hogwarts drop-out. If not for Martinez I wouldn't even have finished basic education.*

*At least try for me.*

*-And why don't you try? Don't they assume you are the mastermind behind everything?*

*...They do, they just want to humiliate me by publicly humiliating you. It would also humiliate Mrs. Ito as she vouched for you.*

Harry didn't mind humiliating himself, but felt his stomach drop at shaming Ms. Ito and even Riddle.

*-What I'm supposed to do?* Harry asked back in resignation.

*Something impressive, I'd hope.* Riddle replied unhelpfully.

The conversation only lasted a few seconds as thoughts were instantaneous and rapid-fire. Harry pushed Riddle back to have the privacy to think. It's not that he felt incapable of impressing. He had done and accomplished many great things with magic in his other life, but he felt embarrassed and uncomfortable to be singled out again. His paranoid mind insisted that someone somehow discovered he was the Boy-who-lived, but his more rational side knew that his interactions with Ms. Ito had pushed him to the limelight as someone to watch, subdue and bring down if necessary. He looked at Riddle. Impressive he said. There was one spell above all that was impressive and easily demonstrated. He might even get away without calling for more attention.

"Ok. Follow me. You alone," Harry clarified when half the table stood up. The man's dark eyes shined in victory as if he had managed to pull a successful heist.

"With my son," the man, whoever he was, bargained.

"Ok." As long as it wasn't a spectacle. He felt Riddle's curiosity but asked the man to trust him. Harry went to the other side of the restaurant where it was empty and stood with his back to the table facing the wall. The man in front of him and the other, presumably the son, to the side to block so no one could see what he would do.

He was almost giddy with pleasure at doing this incredible feat of magic. To the best of his knowledge, no one else had done it. With his palm turned up and close to his chest he closed his eyes and concentrated. There could be no mistakes with this spell. The unrestrained gasp when the spell was completed did wonders for his ego.

"A water spell?" The son asked in confusion at the underwhelming spell, just a small blob of water that was changing animal shapes, and his father's reaction to it.

"How?" The father asked in complete fascination. "Is that? Is that...? But how? You could destroy this entire mountain if you lose control!" He exclaimed with rising panic.

Other than being a never before seen brother of the Fiendfyre, what made this spell stand out is the sheer magnitude of control and power Harry has to have to keep it contained in the palm of his hand. It harmlessly collapsed into different shapes of animals without ever growing or destroying. A massive spell perfectly contained in the palm of his hand. It was the equivalent of holding a natural disaster at bay with just his hand.

Harry felt giddy and wanted to show off a bit. For Ms. Ito of course. He opened his other palm and recreated the spell only this time with air and held both palms up for inspection. "Does it seem like I'm about to lose control?" Harry asked with amusement as he watched the deceptively small bird of prey made of air and magic change into a

jumping bunny. It was a cute spell if you ignored that they could annihilate entire cities in a short amount of time.

"Ok, this is enough. Stop it. I'm sorry I asked...*sir*," the man pleaded with cold sweat.

Harry's stomach dropped. "Ok," Harry closed his hands instantly, the spells immediately dissolving. "I'm sorry, I didn't mean to cause you distress."

The man's eyes turned wild as he looked at the exits. "No, no, it's us who are sorry. Archer, apologize."

While Archer didn't seem to understand the spell or its significance, he could understand the context and immediately apologized.

"You held your end of the bargain. We will talk about the proposal again and have a response ready for you Monday afternoon, if it's not too late for you, sir?"

"No, it's fine," Harry said with disappointment. "Can you keep this a secret, please? I don't like to draw attention."

The man did not hesitate for a second. "We can do an unbreakable vow right this second."

Harry felt like the worst scum on earth for distressing this man to the point of tears. "No, there's no need."

"Thank you, sir. We have perfect occlumency shields. We'll take this to our graves. Right, son?"

"...right."

They walked back to their table and Harry couldn't hide his unhappiness at having scared the living shit out of the man and failing to impress the son. The man walked to the table stiffly and pale; his son behind him shooting confused and wary looks at Harry. *I tried*, Harry thought to Riddle. The entire table, including Riddle assumed the demonstration was a failure.

Harry didn't bother to correct them because it had been a colossal failure. He didn't impress; he terrified the poor man. It brought back



dark thoughts about his time in Hogwarts and how the students feared his more 'dark' powers. The foreign dignitaries got up to leave soon after with only their team staying behind in the now empty restaurant.

"This was a disaster," Avery shouted, his fist hitting the table. Lavender jumped in surprise, her eyes wide and fearful.

"Potter, you didn't even take out your wand," Lucius Malfoy hissed. "You are not talented enough to impress anyone with wandless magic. Years of work down the drain due to your hubris." Draco at his side looked euphoric.

"What did we expect of the dropout, really?" Macnair sneered as he shoved him out of the way.

"Silence," Riddle commanded and the comments stopped, but the dark looks did not. "We have to plan our next steps. Let's consider other allies."

"Start again?" Bellatrix questioned, the only one that dared. "It will take us months." The table exploded in disgruntled murmurs.

"We have no choice," Riddle said finally bringing an end to the whispers. "I need ideas and solutions, not complaints." The conversation turned to other possible candidates, each with its drawbacks. Lavender was timid at first but later regained her usual confidence and contributed to the conversation whenever they were talking about a specific person. She had detailed knowledge about their life, work, and who we may unofficially approach to introduce the idea first.

Harry watched her proudly. People often underestimate her vast network and just consider her a gossip but she had her eyes and ears in almost every pot as a natural byproduct of her social life. Harry was happy to see her flourish in another setting. They were wrapping up the meeting when a butler approached with a letter for Riddle.

Riddle opened the letter and stared at it for a long time. He looked up and his eyes met Harry's. "They accepted the proposal."

The table exploded in applause and exclamations of joy. Plans were quickly made to celebrate at the bar. Riddle left after one final questioning look.

"You coming?" Lavender asked excitedly by the exit. Harry smiled wanly and told her to go ahead, he was stopping by the room first. Finally alone, Harry dropped his head on the table in aggravation.

Task failed successfully?

"How was lunch?" Martinez asked as he entered the room. Harry fell face-first into the bed and screamed at the mattress like a teenager.

"That bad, huh? Come on, let's go to the town down the mountain. It will distract you from whatever happened."

"I don't want to," Harry complained. "Why I'm I like this, Martinez?"

"Like what?" Leiliana asked as she sat in the bed next to him.

Harry hadn't even known she was there during his meltdown. How embarrassing. "Stupid."

She patted his hair consolingly. "What happened?"

"I did the thing again."

"What thing?" She asked with the patience of a saint.

"Scared people away."

"Harry baby, there's no good way of putting this, but it would be very

hard for you to scare someone. With this mop of curly hair, the greenest eyes on the planet, and dimples to boot you are the farthest thing from scary. If you told people you killed someone, 99% of the people would assume from kindness and the others would assume hyperbole."

Harry groaned. That man's terrified face and that wobbly *sir* still clear in his mind. He made a middle age man so fearful for his life and the life of his compatriots that he immediately went to his superiors on a Saturday afternoon to beg them to sign the proposal. And they did.

Martinez sat at his other side and patted his shoulder. "You are a good man, Harry. Anyone that knows you knows that. You have incredible, and yes, sometimes terrifying power, but I have only seen you use that power to protect and help. I know that it can feel isolating for you, but you are not alone. You have us." With one last pat, Martinez got up. "Now, get the fuck up, and let's go to the town. Leiliana wants to see the shops."

Harry groaned but gamely got up. "Where's Pike?"

"Haven't seen him since this morning. Probably at the bar getting sloshed on Riddle's dime. Let's go fetch him before he's too drunk to function."

After fishing Pike and avoiding the raging celebration at the bar they made their way to town. The town looked exactly like any other old village in Europe looks like. A castle with a big wall around it that they went to 'ooh' and 'ahh' at it. A church in the middle of town, some tower hidden in an alley with some sort of occult history, and a medley of old and new stores.

"So an apartment huh?" Martinez asked after Harry explained this morning's conversation while Leiliana was busy at a store.

"Yes. Can you believe it?" Harry asked getting excited all over again.

Pike and Martinez had many, many, many thoughts on the matter. Harry cut through yet another variation of the same argument.

"Am I feeding his obsession with me in exchange for goods and services? Why yes. Yes, I am. Is it wrong? Maybe. Am I going to stop? No."

"Wait, you know?" Pike asked with a surprise that deeply offended Harry.

"Of course, I know. Since the first coffee, I've made my peace that his attention won't wane until Riddle well enough decides he is tired of me and nothing I can do will stop it. So I've been exchanging," whoring, "myself out and increasingly rewarding behavior that benefits me."

"I don't think you know enough about operant conditioning to fool anyone, but especially not Riddle," Pike reasoned. Harry waved the comment away like an annoying fly.

"I trained him or he trained me to accept rewards for good behavior, who knows. The important thing is...an apartment."

Pike threw his head back in laughter. "You are a terrible person. It's hilarious."

Martinez frowned. "You don't have to do this Harry, we've told you a thousand times to move in with us."

"I feel bad taking space and money from you guys."

"And you don't feel bad taking from him?" Pike asked.

Harry blinked. "No, of course not." At the dual unimpressed looks, he explained. "Think of it as reparations. I think I fucking deserve to be pampered a bit. And it's not like he's poor and I'm sucking him dry. It makes him happy, it makes me happy. Do not worry too much about it. I'll bounce if it gets weird. Or weirder."

"Harry... "

Harry cut him off. "To be honest, what's the worst that can happen? He becomes obsessed with killing me and goes into a self-destructive spiral that leads to his destruction?" Been there, done that, bought at the gift shop.

"Well, he kind of destroyed an entire generation in the process but yes, I understand that it's an old song and dance for you," Martinez drawled dryly.

"And he's not dealing with an untrained teenager." Harry reminded them.

"You are fucking stupid," Pike pointed out. "Don't think I'm avenging your death."

"Ok," Harry agreed. Avenging his death while a nice gesture from a friend would be stupid.

"I'll make a moving speech at my wedding if you get killed before it. I might even leave a chair empty. It will be nauseating."

"We can have Mr. Fouchy write the eulogy," Pike proposed to Martinez. Mr. Fouchy had been his hated old boss once upon a time.

"That sounds lovely," Martinez agreed in malicious glee. "It's the least Potter deserves."

"Harsh," Harry responded with a smile. "I'm risking my Masters to be here bonding with you guys and this is the treatment I get?"

"You are here risking your Masters because you are delusional enough to believe you can do it in an adrenaline-filled weekend the week before its due," Martinez corrected. He has no friends. Only enemies.

"A Master in being a master procrastinator," Pike added. "At least you are not insisting Riddle will forget about you soon," Pike said with relief. "The denial was like a stone wall."

*Well, not soon soon, but at some point, Harry thought. Riddle already has his next victim so it will be any day now. Hopefully, after he signs the contract for the apartment.*

Harry was smart enough to change the subject. "Have you talked to the bear yet?" Harry asked Pike as Leliana joined them with more bags and they started walking towards another store.

"The bear?" Pike questioned.

"Yeah, the big hairy guy that's also a fan of the band?"

Martinez looked at him incredulously, "You mean Secretary of Defense Alexander Walker?"

"...maybe? Is Walter a big hairy dude?"

"Yeah..." Pike answered slowly. "Is bear one of your kinks?"

"Whaaaat? Nooo. Of course not. I'm just physically describing him."

Pike rolled his eyes. "No, Harry, I haven't met one of the big bosses from a foreign country."

"I'll have to introduce you guys before the concert," Harry resolved.

## 17.5

### Chapter Summary

Harry shaves a few decades of his life expectancy.

### Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

They napped before the concert obviously; they weren't savages. And were now in the process of slowly getting ready. The ratio of 3 to 1 for the bathroom wasn't ideal, but they were making it work. Lavender and Padma were in Leiliana's room and Martinez was with them so that they could change quicker than if they were all waiting for the bathroom to each change.

Since Riddle had taken away all of his costs for the trip he had been able to splurge on new black jeans and a black t-shirt specifically for the concert. It was the only thing he could afford. All in all, he thought he looked pretty good.

"Is that what you are wearing?" Pike asked as he came out of the bathroom with a towel wrapped around his hips.

Harry narrowed his eyes. "...yeah? What's wrong with it?"

Pike shrugged faux uncaringly, fooling no one. "There's nothing technically wrong with it."

"Good. Because I'm not changing."

Pike sighed as if the world weighed on him. "Would it kill you to be a little less boring? Come ooon, Harry. We are going to meet the band.

Wear something a bit more rock and roll."

Harry looked at the full-length mirror, "but it's all black?"

Pike gave up on him. "Never mind. Here, at least use some accessories."

Harry was skeptical but accepted the silver rings and a simple chain. Pike trying but failing to hide his smugness clued Harry in that he'd been tricked and bamboozled. All the dramatics had been to wear him down to this. Had Pike started by asking him to wear the jewelry, Harry would have said no. But by making dramatics that everything was wrong, Harry conceded this 'one' thing. Pike was right that it was naive of him to think he was in any shape or form manipulating Riddle.

Harry accepted the loss with dignity. Well, kind of. "I looked better without it."

Pike hummed. Jackass.

"You've never been used as a ritual ingredient and it shows," Harry snapped back like a sore loser. Martinez whacked him with a towel.

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The VIP area had both indoor and outdoor areas. The indoor had a buffet spread and artistically scattered couches. The outdoor area had an open bar, tall tables, and a perfect view of the stage. Most of the New-Age Death Eaters had stayed behind at the hotel bar pissed out drunk from day drinking since lunch. Harry was relieved. First, because they were assholes, and second because there were spare tickets for Lavender and Padma. Sadly, Riddle, Lucy, and most of the Australian delegation were here.



Since Harry had bought all the VIP tickets he was able to make a few tweaks to make the space wizard-friendly. Plenty of blurring and notice-me-not charms had been liberally used. The muggles had been shoed out and substituted with appropriate personnel, and so on. Harry congratulated himself on a job well done. Besides, if any muggle saw magic tonight they would blame it on the drugs.

The bartender, an almost teenager with little to no knowledge of British politics was visibly drooling at Riddle when Harry went to get the drinks, "You's boss is so hot," he said breathlessly, passing the drinks without looking either at Harry or the drinks.

"He crucios people and they say thank you afterward," Harry informed him.

"Wow. That's hot." The kid looked at Harry consideringly, "Hey, you want to do something after this is over?"

"Not in a million years," Harry cut him off.

His face crumbled. "Oh, I thought..."

"You are way too young for me," Harry explained.

He looked offended, "I'm twenty-two."

"A baby. I'm more likely to put cartoons on the tv for you than ever think of touching you."

"So your like into older dudes?"

Harry scrunched his face. More like age-appropriate. "...yeah, I guess so."

The kid shrugged. "S'okay. I get it. So your boss...?"

"You can try it." Why not? Harry had tried. Who is he to stop anyone else from lofty ambitions. "But it's your life on the line." That's a fair warning right?

The kid straightened up and pushed his hair back nervously. "Look, he's coming!"

Harry looked back to see the Riddle with his vulture-like eyes on the kid. Riddle turned to look at Harry only when he was touching Harry's shoulder. "What's taking so long, Harry?"

"We are just finishing up. Help me carry them to the table," Harry asked Riddle. Harry looked at the kid pointedly. Now or never, kid. The kid just kept staring at Riddle longingly, saying nothing. Whelp. Never then. Harry took the drinks and started pushing through the crowd to get to the table.

"So you did notice," Riddle said to his ear. Harry shivered from the unexpected warmth. "With all that talk about salmon, I wondered."

Harry's lips twitched in amusement. Did he dare? Who was he kidding? Of course, he dared.

"Ah," Harry said after a pregnant pause. "Your... *club* activities?" He emphasized the word and made it sound positively indecent.

Riddle turned Harry around so they were facing each other and frowned. "Club?" Oh sweet innocent child. I'm going to destroy you.

Don't laugh. Don't laugh. DON'T LAUGH.

Harry showed all his tells of being uncomfortable. He looked to the side, cleared his throat, and changed his weight around. "Yeah...I didn't want to mention anything. It's you know, none of my business what consenting adults do."

"Consenting adults? What are you talking about, Harry?"

DON'T LAUGH.

Harry looked at Riddle innocently confused. "...the S&M club?"

Riddle grabbed him by the arm and gently manhandled him to a deserted corner. "What club?" Riddle snapped, tone promising brimstone and fire.

"The club that all of you are a part of?" Harry lowered the tone of his voice to a whisper. "I know it's supposed to be a big hush-hush secret, but I mean it was kind of obvious. With the whole," Harry waved his hand around encompassing everything and accidentally spilling some of the beer he was holding, "calling you Master and begging for punishment thing."

Riddle looked like he had been carved from stone. "What."

Harry took a step back and continued at normal volume. "I mean, it's fine by me. You know I don't judge anyone. And like I said, it's none of my damn business what consenting adults do in their privacy."

Riddle took a deep breath and seemed to be composing himself; His sanity held by only a thread. "Harry, there's no... *fetish* club."

Harry winked. "Of course, there's not." He was going to hell.

Riddle looked like only sheer will held him together. "Harry listen to me. You got it all wrong."

"Of course," Harry said in his most patronizing voice. "Come on, let's take the drinks to the table. We never have to talk about this again."

Riddle vanished the drinks. "Forget about the bloody beer and listen to me. My temper got a little out of control that night and I... may have gotten overboard with my punishment, but it was..." Riddle frowned as he struggled to explain the context without actually explaining the context.

"Ok, Riddle. You don't have to explain. Is not always about sex. In fact, when done well it's not about the sex at all. As long as everyone is consenting," Harry said gently. He squeezed Riddle's arm in silent support. "I'm glad we talked about this and everything is out in the open."

Riddle muffled a scream at the back of his throat. "Ok, ok. Let's try a different way." Riddle put both hands on Harry's face and looked deeply into his eyes. The connection sprung alive. Riddle guided him to that memory, but Harry had been napping on the couch and not paying much attention. The screams in the dark, with a group of close 'confidants' that were begging for punishment, seemed...sus.

Harry in turn showed him all of the 'obvious' clues: his followers calling him *Master* and *My Lord*, Bellatrix, in general, being Bellatrix, the secret meetings and conversations with code words like "Death Eaters". *You eat something alright*. And if it's dead or smells dead it is none of Harry's goddammed business. All the snake euphemisms. Come on, a snake coming out of the mouth of a skull??? Did Riddle think he was naive? It was obviously a blowjob. A gothic blowjob yes, but a blowjob nonetheless.

Riddle's soul screamed in agony.

Lucious AND Draco Malfoy both acting like greedy girlfriends begging for any scraps of Riddle's attention and insanely jealous of Harry. *Father and son... that's...um...a choice.*

Riddle broke the connection and put a fist to his forehead with his head down and said nothing. Harry tried not to breathe and pursed his lips as tightly as he could but his traitorous shoulders started shaking and within moments the laughter exploded out of him.

Riddle looked at him first with confusion but then his face cleared. "You were joking," Riddle both stated and accused but he visibly relaxed with relief.

Harry sagged against the wall laughing too much to hear Riddle's threats. He had to crouch on the floor because his legs couldn't support him. When he was going to topple to the floor in peals of

laughter Riddle scooped him up like a rag doll. Riddle was still promising death and torture as he gently supported Harry's dead weight. But Harry kept thinking about the underground S&M club and Riddle in skin-tight black fake leather promising 'torture' and the laughter kept going. He made sure to pass the visuals along to Riddle because he loved shaving decades of his life expectancy.

"...think you are **so** hilarious."

Harry wiped the tears from his eyes as he struggled to breathe. "I'll stop. I'll stop," Harry promised as he got his bearings and stood on his own feet. It lasted a second before he doubled up laughing and Riddle was once again supporting him from face-planting. Riddle gave up on him composing himself any time soon and dragged him to the table with a murderous face that dared anyone to ask what was so funny. Harry wheezed and coughed, tears falling down his face as he struggled to breathe.

"The drinks?" Lucy asked. Harry once again laughed until he was almost on the floor.

"...I'll get them," someone offered.

"Whatever he did..." Martinez started to defend Harry and stopped midway. Harry gasped and laughed harder, putting his head between his knees feeling like a wet noodle. Riddle grabbed him under the armpits and dragged him up.

"Don't worry I won't kill him," Riddle said, very much lying.

*Wheeze* , "...save me," *wheeze*. Harry wiped his tears off, cleaned the snot, and he took a step toward Martinez's voice. Riddle stopped him with an iron grip. Not that it was needed. Harry was a jelly pudding.

"Martinez," Harry coughed-laughed. "I don't want to die." Harry doubled laughing again. Riddle's arm wrapped around his chest like a band and supported his torso.

"But Martinez it was *so worth it* ," Harry swore.

Martinez sighed long-suffering.

## Chapter End Notes

An extremely short funny scene that shouldn't have happened. Originally the conversation ended with nevermind after being asked about the salmon and Harry pretending not to understand, but once I got the idea I couldn't not do it. The chapter is not finished (it's barely beginning) but I've been laughing by myself since last night and wanted to share. \*No dictator was harmed during this scene.

## 17 part 2

Harry was still periodically giggling when the opening band started playing, but he could now keep it together. His face hurt. His chest hurt and he still couldn't help the giggles from escaping like war prisoners. Riddle was avoiding him, which gave his chest a break because every time he saw the man he ended up almost on the floor laughing uncontrollably. And he had to stop. People were looking at him funny. More funny than usual.

Of course, he could tell where Riddle was but he was giving the man space and time to plan his murder. After all this time and of all the things he could have died of, he wasn't just going to die of a badly planned murder. That would be just embarrassing. He was also being a good friend and enjoying the concert with Pike.

"So what was so funny?" Lavender prodded as she passed him a beer.

"Can't tell you. He'd kill us both. Best if only I go," Harry said dramatically, as if there wasn't a real concern he'd be dead by sunrise. Laugh until you die (or are killed) was the motto of this New Alternate Reality. He was in it to enjoy it, not to live long.

"I can't believe you are so casual with Mr. Riddle,"

"Me neither." It'll be the death of him. Harry couldn't wait.

"I thought you were lying saying that you were friends with Mr. Riddle. But I've never seen anyone dare to laugh like that at Tom Riddle in his face. A bit suicidal if you ask me." The bear at Lavender's other side commented.



"Walter, right?"

"Walker, actually." Oh damn. So close. "I also thought you were a conniving little man like your boss but you are just an idiot, aren't you? Maybe an idiot savant but an idiot nonetheless." Oh wow. Fists had been thrown. Lines had been drawn. Harry was never learning his name. It was now a protest against the man.

"Hey," Pike interrupted aggressively. *Yeah, Pike, defend him.* "Who the fuck do you think you are saying... truthful things to our friend?" *That motherfucker.*

Lavender almost snorted her beer and Harry raised an indignant "*Hey!*"

"Secretary of Defense of your new ally and Black medal winner, at your service."

"Oh in that case, please continue. Martinez, get a beer to the man. In fact, get another round."

"Fuck off," Martinez responded without looking away from his conversation with Leiliana.

"What's a black medal winner?" Padma asked, leaving the rails and joining their crowd of chairs.

Harry let Pike explain as he drank his disgusting beer. Last time he lets Lavender fetch a round. "It's an underground international magical dueling competition. Duels can and are often to death. A black medal is the winner and can come back next year as a judge. But you also

have other awards, the blue medal is for surviving an intense fight."

"Red is for introducing a new technique. Green for the most memorable fight," Harry added, leaving his beer forgotten on the table. It was probably how the uncultured, buffoon Walter got his position as Secretary of Defense. It jump-starts your career if you impress the right people.

"How do you know so much?" The bear, Wally-something, asked.

"We went, when was it? Two years ago, I think. Harry ate a bad hogdog and puked all over a former judge. Almost got his head lopped off if not for some quick talking. Got the dubious honor of being the Puker for the rest of the night."

"How did you even get invited?" Walty asked.

"Invited?" Pike asked in confusion. "No, no, we crashed."

The next round of beers arrived. And the next one. And the one after that. And many more because an open bar is like an unlimited buffet; after you paid the entrance fee you are going to eat until you puke. That's just life; Harry doesn't make the rules.

Harry got tired of beers after the eighth and moved to hard liquor. Lavender called out for shots. So shots. And then wine to wash the flavor off. Maria, his newfound best friend from Australia wanted to do body shots, but Harry very loudly told her his boss was here so he couldn't. Said boss also said Harry couldn't. But he did consolation jello shots. Freaking disgusting. What an awful day to have taste buds.

Tim was also a riot. Tim had two children and did not like olives. Many other people were drinking with them. But Harry did not care about them. Harry made sure Tim's drinks did not have olives for the rest of the concert. He told the increasingly irritable bartender at least three times to not put olives in Tim's drink.

"It's a *beer* !"

Harry looked at the man as if he was the crazy one. "Just making sure. No need to shout." The man stopped serving Harry, so Harry went back to the flirty almost-teenager for drinks. Harry got just in time to hear Padma asking Pike if he had a boyfriend.

"Gay? I'm not gay. I'm straight."

"...you just said. I'm mean...I'm confused."

"I have eyes. I know when someone is objectively good looking and then I pretend we are talking about a hot girl and respond appropriately. I don't want Harry to feel left out with Martinez and me both straight."

"That's...that's nice...of you," Padma said haltingly, still incredibly confused. Anyone that heard Pike speak would be incredibly confused.

"Yeah, just because he likes to suck dicks half the time doesn't mean I can't talk to him about it like I normally talk to him when he sucks..." Martinez punched his shoulder, "other things."

Harry patted Pike's back. Pike was a good friend. Sometimes. Harry

passed around the beers. They met the band after an unholy amount of drinks. And they were so nice. The nicest. But they were muggles so magic was hush-hush. Harry probably said that a few times out loud. The band was breaking up. Something - something fights, money problems, solo career. Harry had trouble concentrating on words. Pike cried. Harry cried because Pike was crying. The bear did not cry but looked like he wanted to. Martinez corralled them back to the hotel where the bar waited for them with open arms.

The concert had been bomb; so celebratory shots. Sad shots in honor of the band breaking up. Celebratory shots because Riddle was paying the tab and so on. Harry could be somewhat functional even piss out drunk, but Martinez was already puking so Leiliana said their goodbyes. Pike was flirting with Maria. Padma was jealous that Pike was flirting with someone else and Lavander was consoling her in the bathroom. Harry had no idea Padma was interested and he was pretty sure Pike didn't know either.

Riddle was romancing Lucy in a dark corner of the bar. Harry promised himself that one more beer and he was going to bed before doing something stupid. Like sleeping with a stranger to relieve his anger and loneliness. Not because he was learning to avoid self-destructive spirals but because he was pretty sure he was too drunk to perform. Best leave it for another day.

He had the best intention of going to bed and sleeping. He said goodbye to everyone, promised Maria they would go on the trip to Barbados like they had planned, traded numbers with Tim No-olives, did the whole song and dance, and even managed to get to his room.

And then he found a letter on top of his bed. Inside was the beautiful ritual he had been hoping for. Harry ignored the letter from Dr. Ito for now. He had to close one eye and put the paper at different distances to be able to focus but he got the gist of it. It was not finished, because Harry's life was never that convenient, but it had a good solid base. It looked theoretically possible but physically impossible with several layers that will be hell to assemble. And if he got over all those barriers, making it portable? Laughable.

Next thing he knew he was in an empty events room with a can of paint in one hand and a paintbrush in the other. For some reason, Goyle was there and Lavender was on the floor eating sour gummies. Harry was preventing a hangover by drinking more whiskey. Riddle had been asking for a while where he was but Harry didn't know. Around somewhere. Their connection was fuggy at best. Probably due to Harry's brain floating in alcohol.

Goyle liked oil painting; he had a few finished oil works that he invited Harry to see. Nice of him. Goyle might be flirting but Harry wasn't sure and didn't want to make assumptions. It explained where Harry got the painting but not when or why Goyle got involved. But none of that was as important as getting this ritual to work. Alcohol made him delusionally think he was smarter than he was and Harry was excitedly testing ideas left and right.

"Maybe painting is a bad idea," Goyle suggested timidly after the last explosion.

Harry looked at the frank disaster he had made on the carpeted floor and agreed. "Painting is a no go." Harry looked at Goyle consideringly. Artists saw things differently, didn't they? "What do you suggest?"

Goyle looked at him blankly. "Sometimes I do mock-ups in sand to see how it looks."

Harry perked up as a fresh wind of mania entered his system. "Sand! You are a genius Goyle!"

But first, they had an intermission where they tried whiskey-soaked sour gummies. 0/10. Would not recomend.

At some point after making a mess with sand, Harry figured he would need some blood. He's not sure about the details but it felt right. So he conjured a chicken. Lavender named the chicken Claude and put a very handsome bow tie on Claude. So of course they couldn't kill Claude. Claude was their child now and they had to figure out joint custody.

"Harry is four in the bloody morning and you are in an abandoned part of the hotel drunk out of your mind holding a chicken and is that ...? Of course you are drunkenly experimenting with a ritual."

Harry blinked, disoriented about why Riddle was here. Was this delirium tremens setting in? Harry looked at the bottle of whiskey in confused betrayal.

"Are you on drugs?" Riddle asked with more aggression than what Harry felt the situation needed. Goyle whimpered in the background. Poor Goyle.

"No." Harry was sure of that. He looked at Riddle confused. "You killed our plans of a drug binge by being here." They were on the straight and narrow with only alcohol as their self-destructing poison. Like adults. Dysfunctional adults but adults.

Harry blinked and he was in front of his room door as Lavender frantically looked for their room key. Riddle waited just off the side like a sleep paralysis demon. Finally, Lavender gave up and started pounding on the door. Padma blearily opened the door and went back to bed...with Pike. That explained why Lavender was with him and not sleeping in their room. Harry closed the door, took off his shoes, and fell to the bed. Lavender joined him shortly after. Before falling unconscious he had a nagging thought. Why had Riddle looked for him?

What a confusing man.

Harry only woke up for the bus at two in the afternoon because Leiliana and Martinez made sure they were up and going an hour before.

"Harry, why did you bring a chicken to the bus?" Martinez irritably asked.

"His name is Claude," Harry only said.

"Is it real or conjured?" Pike asked poking the chicken.

Harry put his hands where he figured the chicken's ears were. "He," Harry started. "She," Lavender corrected. "Is real-ish. Don't let her hear you that she isn't real." Lavender put Claude inside a conjured pet carrier and put the bird gently on the floor.

Annoyingly, Riddle sat next to him in the same three-seat row with Lucy on Riddle's other side. Supposedly Riddle was very interested in studying the ritual with Harry. And no, it couldn't wait until they got back. And no, Harry, you can't change chairs.

Harry felt trapped between the window, Riddle, and all of their unsaid conversations. The ritual was enough of a distraction that he could almost forget it. Almost. If not for the tension of Lucy's annoyance with Riddle's weird and obvious obsession with his assistant. And Riddle's weird obsession with him while sleeping with someone else. It almost made Harry explode his side of the bus and just run for it. Fuck it all. But sadly, he needed Riddle's help to finish

this ritual, an important step before opening the gates of Atlantis and releasing who knows what into the world.

"Bring me coffee," Harry demanded to Pike as he was getting out of the bus for a last-minute snack run before the hours-long bus ride.

"Fuck off," Pike flipped him off. They were all a bit... *grumpy* from their massive hangover that even with hangover potions clinged to them like an unwanted visitor.

"For fuck's sake Pike, when I have ever had cold coffee with cream? You are as observant as a pile of rocks."

"You will drink it and you will like it. No one made you stay on the bus like a diva."

Harry took a sip. Then another. "It's good," he admitted reluctantly.

"Of course it's good, you wanker. Think I would buy you something you won't like?"

And just because Harry was a fucker and Pike was his best friend he responded with a sure, "Yes."

"Harry," Riddle called him. Harry turned back to Riddle from how he had been contorting to talk back to Pike. "I don't think this change will work," Riddle said, bringing Harry's attention back to the ritual and pointing at a spot in the ritual.



Harry zeroed in on the problem as he moved the ice on his beverage to mix the cream with the coffee. "It doesn't," Harry said, remembering last night. "I tried it to see last night and it burns the entire ritual down." Riddle will get a hefty carpet removal bill from the hotel.

After a few hours, Harry got tired of hitting the same brick wall with the ritual and decided to give it a rest. He joined the conversation the others were having by hanging off the back of his chair to be able to see everyone. They were exchanging embarrassing stories. Harry had no intention of contributing to the topic but Pike had other ideas.

"Harry, Harry," he called excitedly from across the bus, "tell them about that time you ended up naked in the middle of a ritual."

Everyone turned to look at Harry and Harry glared at Pike. "How about no," Harry said firmly. Riddle turned to the conversation and Harry despaired.

"Oooh. We have to hear this," Padma cheered.

"Potter, don't hold out on us," Lavender said almost out of her seat. "Pass me one of those chocolates you are hoarding," she asked Pike. Pike reluctantly passed one. Even Riddle looked interested.

"We were at a pub in the magical side of Canada," Pike started because he had zero respect for Harry's wishes. "And this bomb-ass woman, and I mean a 10 out of 10 entered the pub and headed straight to Potter. This was probably the first red flag but it was almost 2 am and we were drunk. She takes Potter by the collar and drags him out while we cheer like crazy."

"I'm getting kidnapped and you did nothing," Harry grouched.

"What do you mean I did nothing? I cheered. And don't fuck with me, Potter, you walked willingly."

"Harry, you tell the story. This dumbass doesn't know how to tell a story," Martinez complained.

Harry resigned himself that his most embarrassing story would be told one way or another and it is best if he tells it himself or else Pike will tell it in the most humiliating way possible.

"Fine. So, I did happily let her apparate us and we end up in what looked like a horror movie basement. And I'm like ok, whatever, I'm game for some role-playing. Then she commands me to get naked and I'm like yes! this is going to be awesome. Then she puts me in a ritual stone and shackles me."

"And you still weren't suspicious?" Lavender asked, half with horror and half with amusement.

"Not yet. I find it a little strange that there isn't a conversation about likes/dislikes or safewords but I mean, with the way she looks...there is little she can do that I'm not game for at this point. And I assume this is going to be a no-means-no and yes is fucking yes scenario, so no. I wasn't worried."

"And you were horny," Pike added.

"And I was horny so I'm ignoring all the red flags like it's my superpower." A true talent of Harry.

"Story of your life," Pike interjects.

"Anyway," Harry plows through, "She starts adding ropes and gags and I'm like fine. Makes sense. It goes with the whole theme of the basement. Weird, but not the weirdest thing, you know? Like I would have been concerned if it was a kink that involve stuffed animals or dolls or something like that. Shackles, gags, and ropes are in the realm of normal and sometimes it's easier to enact a fantasy with a stranger. So I was like cool, ok, fun. Hope she knows what she's doing or else I'm going to have terrible rope burns but fuck it everyone has to learn somehow."

"I am now deeply curious about what's the weirdest sex thing you have done, Potter, if ritual stone and horror movie basement are not breaking any glass ceiling," Lavender wonders out loud.

Harry winked at her. "Anyway," Harry gets back at the story, "she takes out a piece of chalk and starts drawing symbols but I can't see what exactly because my field of vision is the ceiling but I'm thinking sex magic you know? There's even some sex magic that needs a bit of pain and while not what I wanted for the night as long as sex was still part of the equation I wasn't complaining."

Everyone laughs.

"You have experience in sex magic?" Liliana asked curiously. It isn't well-known magic.

"Well, a bit. It drains the fuck out of me and not the best sex, to be honest. You feel drugged and lethargic while also overstimulated. But I was thinking maybe she has a good reason for it? A magical boost for a healing spell or whatever. I don't know. I didn't care. At this point, I was a bit peeved because sex magic is something you really should talk about before starting. Not enough to get out but enough to

look around more carefully. So I see when she brings out this knife with a curved blade that had ritualist flames coming out of it and you know what? I noped out of there so fast I apparated naked in the middle of the restaurant of the hotel we were staying in and...that's the story of how I spent a night in a Canadian prison for indecent exposure."

"So it was the knife that finally did it?" Padma wondered.

"I mean..." Harry paused unsure, "if it had been a small knife or at least some sort of conversation about it, you know? If she had told me we were avoiding neck, head, and private parts..." Harry shrugged.

"That's not even your weirdest sex story," Martinez adds unhelpfully.

"Or your first go-around as a ritual ingredient," Pike added.

"Or the last time a group of people saw you naked," Martinez continued.

"Fuck off both of you. Why I am friends with assholes?"

"Is indecent exposure still on your record?" Padma asked with amazement.

"Nah. They let me go with a warning in the morning after I explained what happened and someone recognized the description and said it wasn't her first time. "

"So Harry, what is your weirdest sex story? Inquiring minds want to know," Lavender asked.

"Hard pass. I don't talk about my sex life or sex partners. The only reason this story was fine was that it had no sex in it."

The rest of the bus ride was uneventful and Harry slept most of the way. Riddle, annoyingly, made an excellent pillow. Riddle's smugness would have kept Harry up if he wasn't so tired.

*What do you want? With the fantastic Lucy on your other side, what do you need from me?*

Riddle only responded with an image of his green eyes. Green eyes always mean Harry.

## Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

## Chapter 18

Monday started chaotically. It seemed like there was a fire to put out in every department. Not that Harry gave two single fucks if the whole ministry went down in flames. Hell, he'd be throwing the tinder himself...if it didn't affect him. But since it prolonged his work day it became his problem and something he had to contain. If only to maintain the illusion that he worked normal hours.

At last, the Auror department made some arrests of the people targeting Riddle. And it was a shitshow as expected. It was the only thing people were talking about in the hallways of the Ministry. Harry doubted any real work will be done today. Riddle's assassination attempts came to the public and it was one press conference after another. It consumed their already packed morning.

Harry was absurdly glad that Riddle had the spotlight because his theory about Atlantis finally made the newspapers in the UK after circulating for some time in the US. Thanks to Riddle's shit show it was all the way down to the fifth page and only half a page. Asami Ito had maintained her promise and Harry's "contribution" to medicine had been filtered through so many institutions that no one had any hope of tracing it back to him. So good news for him. Bad news for Riddle.

Harry wasn't surprised about any of the names of the accused and Riddle was frustrated that Harry wasn't surprised at any of the names. But what he was going to do? Act shocked to learn that Umbridge was evil? That Fudge was corrupt? Was the water wet?

A few others from so-called light families banded together with Regulus to kill what they saw as an "evil" politician with a conservative agenda that had no intention of going anywhere anytime soon. Harry was saddened but not surprised to see a few familiar names and faces. They were soon going to jail for a very long time, but what did they expect of a failed murder plot?

Forget that Riddle is an important politician (or the undisputed overlord of their country. Same thing), they conspired to kill someone and were very nearly successful. What did they expect? In an ideal world, their plan would be uncovered and they would receive jail time. But maybe they banked on the government corruption and Riddle's political enemies supporting them. Or the more insidious evil of people like James Potter and Sirius Black whose goodwill and incompetence could have carried them through. Who knows. Harry will leave the detective work to the Aurors and stay in his lane.

No, the names weren't surprising. What Harry wanted was to resolve the issue as quickly and cleanly as possible but Riddle was proving to be exceptionally stubborn in taking decisive action.

Riddle entered the office and faced Harry with his arms crossed. Harry threw the door of the office closed in Draco's face. Fuck off.

"Hear me out, first we give Umbridge the death penalty," Harry very reasonably started. He had the whole plan mapped out and it would take half a day at most to see it out. It would only prolong their day for about two hours. With the paperwork maybe three. Harry was hopeful.

Riddle was not cooperating. "For the last time, Harry, she hasn't had her trial."

How difficult. "We can give her a post-mortum trial if you are truly

that stubborn about it. Summon her ghost if you really want to." Harry perked up. "Then later, we can chain her ghost to a public bathroom. A *muggle* public bathroom. Ohh, we can bind her soul to a portrait of the fires of hell so she burns for eternity and *then* hang her painting in a public muggle bathroom." It would never give her a moment of rest. It would almost balance out all the suffering she has caused.

"That's..." Riddle looked at Harry intensely, more so than usual, he took a few steps towards Harry before snapping out of whatever fog had overtaken him. "Unexpected from you. We'll unpack that another moment. For now, we have to follow proper protocol. The case is too visible to be handled any other way."

Very reasonable. Harry did not want to be reasonable. He wanted to pee in Umbridge's tomb. But this was the reason why Harry liked Riddle as a politician and felt that the sociopath was better than the supposedly normal competition. Riddle was so worried about being seen as good, and proper, and just that he acted remarkably decent. For a politician anyway.

"Your life has been targeted," Harry tried to appeal to the man's sense of safety. Since violence for the sake of violence weirdly wasn't working. "We have to be swift in action and not hesitate. Out of an abundance of caution. I worry that other potential enemies will get ideas if you are too lenient."

"It's not that I don't agree she should be killed after a proper trial. I'm just confused why *you* would kill a woman without a proper trial. What if she's innocent?"

Harry scuffed. They both knew she was not. The reports were clear. And even if in this particular matter she was somehow perfectly set up, what of it? Harry wouldn't shed a tear. That woman was everyone's villain origin story. But Riddle annoyingly pricked his conscience of setting a precedent of killing without a trial.



"Why kill her?" Riddle insisted on knowing. "Why not let her spend her days in Azkaban?"

Harry sighed, feeling that he had to be honest about his prejudice. "I just really hate her and wouldn't mind seeing her killed in as vicious a way I can make it."

Riddle gave him a considering look as if he was re-evaluating everything he knew about Harry. Maybe Harry was being too ruthless if even Riddle is shocked.

Harry could admit that he was more tired than usual after getting absolutely trashed Saturday and the long bus ride Sunday. His neighbor also started banging on the walls last night and didn't stop until 3am. It could be making him more aggressive than he would usually be?

Or maybe Riddle hadn't been exposed to this side of him. Harry was sure that he would find an excuse to kill Umbridge any day.

"I see that. And what about Fudge?"

Cornelius Fudge, the man responsible for the Triwizard Tournament, Dementors at school, and a year-long smear campaign against a teenager. Yeah. Harry was game. "Not as satisfying but say the word and we can make it happen." Harry raised the notepad and pen he carried as the Perfect Assistant he was trying to impersonate.

"I can't give my opponents that opening."

Harry tried to hide his expression at realizing that Riddle would not budge. What's the use of having an overload platonically obsessed with you if they don't kill your enemies?

His petulant face might have cracked his professionalism veneer because Riddle said, "Don't pout, my Harry. Here, have a treacle tart."

Harry perked up and tore the wrapping. "Hey, why are you carrying treacle tarts in your pocket?" Harry asked as he bit into it and almost fainted with how good it was. "Do you have more?"

"Come. I want to see the interrogations."

"...that's not on the schedule." Harry despaired. He was going home at ten at the earliest and won't even have the satisfaction of seeing Umbridge dead.

The rest of the day went better. Harry made sure of it. No more unscheduled meetings or distractions. Customer Service Harry was the name of the day.

He smiled as he denied entrance to politicians that wanted to barge into Riddle's office unannounced to discuss the "shocking news". He apologized with a contrite expression and a "so sorry sir" on his lips. Sometimes he was the meek, powerless "just the assistant, sir", and other times he was "Mr. Riddle's Assistant" with the full power that entailed. The tediousness of endless meetings was counterbalanced by the rush of adrenaline from staying one step ahead of Riddle. And coffee. Riddle kept to his promise and Harry was now always supplied with fresh coffee the moment he thought about it.

Riddle's offer of an apartment was his new North and Harry wasn't deviating from it. It was not Imposter syndrome because Harry the Auror morphed into Harry the Assistant as if the other had never existed.

"You are a capable actor," Riddle remarked once they left their last meeting.

"I know, right? I missed my calling." Thanks, Dursleys, for making him mask all of his real emotions and master the ability of saying what people wanted to hear and not a peep more.

"If I didn't know you, I may have believed the act."

Harry looked at the man. The tone had been weird for the conversation. Oddly flat and with an undercurrent of anger. Harry wondered if he should ignore it, but his curiosity got the better of him.

"Does it bother you? That if you didn't know me you would have believed the act?"

Harry almost thought Riddle wasn't going to respond but after a few more hallways he responded, "Yes."

"You know me now," Harry reasoned, for some unknown reason wanting to comfort Riddle.

"Do I? A few hours ago you were trying to convince me to kill a woman that as far as I know, you've never met."

To the jugular without lubricant. Harry opened the door and they walked into the courtroom in silence. The bills and amendments that had been submitted throughout the last quarter, except the few Harry managed to kill, would be voted on today.

Riddle was only there to watch as it was voted by the majority of the chamber. Harry stayed standing near the doors while Riddle went forward to sit at the front. Pike sat to Riddle's right as his security for the event. It was a "promotion" of sorts. A public display of Riddle's thanks for saving his life.

Or something else, Harry amended as he saw them whispering to each other. He couldn't see their faces but whatever it was, it was more important than what was happening on the floor.

The voting was depressingly short. Almost all the bills passed without opposition. Harry felt his back tense and his shoulders hunched when the final amendment passed and the hall burst into cheers. He closed his eyes and lowered his face for a moment as he faced his crippling disappointment with the Wizarding World and their backward ways. He hated himself for always hoping. It always ended in disappointment. He felt Riddle's eyes on him so he straightened his shoulders.

Maybe the next generation will be better.

"Harry," Pike called as he walked directly towards him with the sea of exiting politicians. Harry looked up and noted the strange undercurrent between his friend and his boss as they neared. It was probably Pike's 'I want to fuck with someone until they cry' smile, coupled with Riddle's tense shoulders that clued him in.

"Harry, I want to leave Britain," Pike said with an air of indifference. "The air is just not agreeing with me anymore," he explained simply.

Harry nodded slowly. He looked from Pike to Riddle and wondered what happened. But whatever happened was immaterial. "Ok, when?"

Pike nodded unsurprised. "Now."

Harry looked around the chamber and nodded. If Pike wanted to leave due to something Riddle said or due to the politics, Harry sure as hell wasn't staying. "Let's go then. I have everything I need on me and we can buy the rest when we arrive." Harry rummaged in his pocket. "I have my resignation letter here somewhere."

"You have a resignation letter in your pocket?" Riddle whispered threateningly as he loomed over Harry. Harry gave Riddle a distracted smile. Cute. Of course, he carried his resignation letter in his pocket. The surprising thing is that he hadn't needed to use it yet.

"Here. Oh, wait that's the two-week notice. Here, this one is effective immediately."

Riddle hissed in Pike's ear something too low for Harry to hear. Pike turned his head so Harry couldn't read his lips and mouthed something back.

"Seems like we are not leaving today, Harry," Pike said finally with a satisfied grin. Harry looked from the smile on Pike's face to Riddle's death-filled glare.

"Ok... You'll explain later?" Harry asked Pike.

"Yes," Pike responded.

Harry punched Pike's shoulder playfully. "Don't play with my feelings like that. For a moment I thought I was going to end the day sipping Mojitos while watching the sunset at the beach. Fuck. Back to the grinder. We have like a thousand meetings left. I'll talk to you later."

"Later," Pike agreed. "Hey, Harry," Pike called him back.

Harry looked back. "Yeah?"

"Stay safe, man."

Harry smiled back. It was as close as an *I love you, I appreciate you, You are important in my life* as Harry was ever going to get from Pike. "Ok," he promised.

Riddle herded him back to the office with one last death glare at Pike. He threw both letters to the fire. Harry sighed sadly. Now he had to write them again.

"Be nice," Harry told Pike when they crossed paths again that day.

"I'm always nice," Pike responded.

"Are you jealous of my relationship with Harry?" Riddle asked with a superior smirk.

"Your relationship with Harry?" Pike repeated dumbly. "Am I jealous?" Pike asked incredulously. "What relationship?" Pike asked with the beginning of a bloodthirsty smile.

"I'm on my way to being Harry's most important person."

Pike blinked and then threw his head back and laughed. "Oh, you are serious?" Delusional. "I'm sorry to be the one to break this to you, Riddle," he wasn't, "but you are Harry's most recent morbid curiosity and I'm his best friend. We are not even in the same game, much less competition."

Riddle's smile dropped. "I'm more than a morbid curiosity."

"Oh really?" Pike smirked. "You sure about that?" If Riddle was going to be aggressive it is best to show his true colors now than when Harry was invested.

Riddle frowned.

The hall burst into cheers. The parting ceremony was brief and they made their way to the back where a bored, hunched Harry was waiting for them by the door.

"Harry," Pike called. Harry looked up from the floor and looked from one to the other.

"Harry, I want to leave Britain. The air is just not agreeing with me anymore." Pike didn't even pretend to sound convincing or give an excuse. He didn't need to.

"Ok. When?" Harry accepted easily. Predictable to anyone that knew anything about Harry. Harry was a loyal friend and after giving you his loyalty he would follow you to the ends of the world.

Riddle did not know Harry and it was up to Pike to disabuse him of the notion he was in any way an important person in Harry's life. Riddle would either sink or swim.

Get mad, do something stupid and lose Harry. Or learn from this. Pike was practically being a saint at giving Riddle this teaching moment. And maybe Riddle will surprise them both by acting reasonably. Pike was fine with either scenario.

Pike nodded at Harry. "Now."

Harry nodded seriously. "Let's go then. I have everything I need on me and we can buy the rest when we arrive." Harry rummaged in his pocket. "I have my resignation letter here somewhere." Pike watched Riddle's expression avidly. *See how easily you can lose him? You are nothing and no one to Harry.*

"You have a resignation letter in your pocket?" Riddle asked with threats woven in every syllable. Harry looked up with a smile. Pike internally cackled. Of course, Harry reacted to threats of violence with fondness.

"Here. Oh, wait that is the two-week notice. Here, this one is effective



immediately."

"You've proven your point," Riddle hissed to Pike's ear, not taking Harry's resignation.

"Anything else I should be jealous of?" Pike prodded with a raised eyebrow and a devious smile.

Riddle closed his fists in anger.

Sink or swim, Riddle. What's it going to be?

Riddle did not act out his aggression and did not even make a move at Harry to either stop him or convince him otherwise. So Pike decided to cut him loose. Harry was more animated since starting to hang out with Riddle and as long as Riddle wasn't a safety risk it was ok.

"Seems like we are not leaving today, Harry," Pike said finally.

Harry looked from Pike to Riddle. "Ok. You'll explain later?" Harry asked Pike.

"Yes," Pike agreed. They were going to talk about this later.

"I'll let this pass because you clearly don't know Harry. But next time you feel like doing this, it's going to play out very differently," Pike warned. "And pro-tip, get the friends on your side. Good luck convincing Harry into a relationship if I disapprove."

"Are you interested in Harry?" Riddle asked. The moron. They were both fucking morons and deserved each other.

"Fuck no, but that's my brother and if I feel you don't have Harry's best interests at heart...well, the world is a big place isn't it?" Pike winked.

Pike amusedly let Harry talk about their plans of going to a tropical place while Riddle stewed in place "...I'll talk to you later," Harry finished.

"Later," Pike agreed. "Hey, Harry," Pike called him back.

Harry looked back. "Yeah?"

"Stay safe, man."

Harry smiled and it was the pure smile that rarely graced his face. It transformed Harry's face into something soft. Less broken. "Ok," Harry promised.

Riddle looked captivated.

Harry was going to destroy him. Pike couldn't find it in himself to be sorry.

Harry closed the door and put a wedge so that Draco couldn't get in.

"You aren't supposed to close the door," Riddle reminded him.

*Bite me. It's staying close.*

Out loud he only hummed in agreement and sat down. Yes, he wasn't supposed to close the door but unless Riddle forced the situation, that door was staying closed. They had a lot of work with a limited amount of time.

Harry organized his pile of papers and looked at them despondently. He decided to talk with Riddle instead. That interaction in the courtroom was too weird to ignore.

"Sooooo, what did you and Pike talk about?"

Riddle didn't even look up. "Nothing."

"Really?" Harry prodded.

"Really. He was very...informative. We should invite him to dinner this week."

"Really? Because Pike looked like he could be cooking your head on a stew and have the same expression. He's my best friend and all, but you shouldn't provoke him. He can be, um, vicious."

"I rule Britain," Riddle thought to remind him as he moved a pile of papers to another bigger pile of papers.

"And he's a poison specialist," Harry reminded him. "Don't get cocky."

Harry will also paint the streets with Riddle's blood if he hurt Pike. Some of that thought or feeling might have leaked because Riddle huffed in annoyance, finally raising his eyes from the papers. "I don't know what you see in him."

"He can be a vicious little shit," Harry agreed with a fond smile. "If anyone knows is me. Did you know he used to hate me back," at the Academy, Harry swallowed the words, "when we met?"

Harry regretted starting this conversation. This was a story from 'before' and up until now they've always been careful to stick with stories from the last three years.

"What did he do?" Riddle asked curiously. Well, it wasn't like Pike was going to deny this story so how would Riddle prove it didn't happen?

"He'd call me boot licker, stupid, rash, the usual. He once randomly came at me about my sex life." Harry huffed in amusement. "As if there weren't retired prostitutes with less experience than him. Basically tried to make my life hell." The good old days of young, dumb, and angry.

Riddle grunted. "Sounds like him. And what did you do?"

Harry smirked. "I ignored him. It drove him up the walls in fury and he got meaner and meaner until one day he took it too far and I punched him in the face. After that, we went out to drink beer and we've been friends ever since." They hadn't been as close as they are now, not for a mile, but Harry had been a guest at Pike's wedding and

took care of his dog when his wife got hospitalized for a week.

"Picardos loves you," Riddle said watching his face carefully.

Harry scoffed, "Of course he fucking loves me. He let me include the government in the last concert of his favorite band and thus completely destroying his plans for the weekend by minimizing the drinking, drug, and sex binge to socially acceptable levels. And he did it with minimal fuss. If that isn't fucking love I don't know what is. He adores me and I'm probably his favorite person in the world because otherwise, he would have caved my face in."

Riddle hummed and they got back to the tedious process of working on trials for the upcoming week. This could have all been avoided, Harry despaired.

"If something important happened, who would you seek out first?" Riddle asked out of nowhere.

Harry thought carefully about Riddle's question, mostly because he didn't want to work on the useless trial documents. "Depends," Harry said seriously, chewing on his quill. "If I don't want judgment then Pike. If I want judgment then Martinez."

"But, like an emergency," Riddle explained.

"Either would work depending on the emergency."

"And who else?"

Harry looked at Riddle blankly. "There's no one else. The Aurors? Emergency services?" He threw wild guesses.

"You could call me too," Riddle suggested.

"Oh. Then I'd call Martinez, then Pike, then Emergency services, then you, and finally if no other choice the Aurors." Useless motherfuckers that they were.

"Why I'm so low on your list?"

Harry looked at Riddle and blinked slowly. "I might sound crazy," Harry started, "but you could, you know, do the normal thing and cultivate a relationship through time and mutual respect?"

Riddle tsked. "You are so troublesome."

Harry smiled. "Oh, you don't know the half of it."

*I'm learning,* Riddle's thought reached him.

Why did that sound like a threat?

Harry excused himself from lunch like always. Riddle insisted but Harry gave him all the excuses under the sun. On his way out of the office, he met with Lavender that was coming in. She was dressed in a very professional suit with only pink jewelry to highlight her bubbly personality.

"Harry! Claude misses you! Are you also going to lunch with us?" She asked brightly. Harry's heart stilled as it often those when he's confronted with Lavender. The bittersweet feeling of yearning that Harry was just enough of a masochist to pursue.

"I miss the little feather duster too. Wait, you are going to lunch with Mr. Riddle?" Harry checked.

"Yes! I just got my contract this morning and Mr. Riddle said it was important for me to attend this work lunch."

"Oh, you got the job?" Harry asked excitedly.

"Yeah, I guess Mr. Riddle was impressed with the little I could contribute to the meeting," she said modestly. "Thanks, Harry, I wouldn't have gotten this opportunity if it wasn't for you," she said fondly, taking his hand and gently squeezing it before letting go. Harry swooned.

"Let's go to lunch. I want to know all about it." He sent Pike and Martinez a quick text with the change of plans.

Riddle followed them with a displeased frown. Lavender looked at him nervously but Harry smiled in reassurance. "He's just a grouch, don't worry about it," Harry whispered in her ear when Riddle went to greet his minions. Harry excluded himself from the minion category because he practices self-care.

"Today has been stressful," Lavender sympathized with Riddle like the ray of sun she was.

The lunch meeting was predictably dull with talks about the trials and the prisoners of pureblood families. Harry sent a displeased look at Riddle at every little roadblock mentioned. This could have been avoided by killing them all.

"Potter," Lucious Malfoy barked. "Are you taking notes?"

It seemed that Harry's failure of a demonstration had given them the impression that Harry had fallen from grace. It helped that Riddle wasn't there to hear them.

Harry breathed deeply and took a sip of his wine before responding. "Mr. Malfoy, I have excellent memory. You need not worry." What he wouldn't give to go back to solving his problems by killing the bad guy. Office workers that don't resort to homicide are the everyday heroes.

Snape snorted and his smile turned vicious. "Is that why you almost failed potions every year?"

Dear Lord, give him the patience not to kill someone today with a desert spoon. "Not at all, it must have been your teaching," Harry responded calmly. He didn't give either time to answer and started a conversation with Goyle.

"Have you painted anything new?"

Bless Goyle's thick head that he didn't catch any of the tension on their side of the table and responded with a pleased smile.



"Yes, actually. I started watercolor painting yesterday. I've been experimenting with color combinations in the same color pallet and it's been going great."

There was a moment of shocked silence as the Death Eaters processed that Goyle had any hobby other than frowning.

"You paint?" Draco asked in confusion.

"Maybe you can show me when you finish," Harry responded. Goyle smiled happily giving Golden Retriever energy. Harry helplessly smiled back.

After the official talks were over, Harry had a great lunch with Lavender. She invited him to hang out after work for drinks to celebrate her new job.

"Actually, you can't," Riddle interjected. "I need to show you something after work."

Lavender jumped in surprise since last she had seen Riddle he had been on the other side of the room. Harry deflated. "Oh, ok."

"It's an apartment," Riddle responded quickly. "I think you will like it."

Harry cheered up. "Really? Where?"

"My building."

Harry deflated again. "I already checked and there are no vacancies."

"You'll see," Riddle said mysteriously.

Harry's hand stilled and he turned worried eyes at Riddle. "Gilbert?"

Riddle sighed in resignation but smiled fondly at Harry. "Gilbert is perfectly healthy last I heard. And no, it's not his apartment. He is resisting moving."

"Oh good," Harry breathed in relief. "Then who?"

"You'll see."

Harry looked at the man suspiciously. "When you hear apartment hunting what do you think it means? Because I don't think it means what you think it means." Riddle's poor neighbors. One of them was going to "mysteriously" drop dead.

Riddle laughed.

It did not reassure Harry.

Harry got up the stairs and almost backed out to check if they were on the right floor.

"This is it," Riddle said, taking his shoulders and pushing him forward.

"There are three doors?" Harry asked extremely confused and disoriented. Riddle's floor only had two apartments because they were ridiculously large. "There's another apartment on your floor?"

"Mr. Gilbert Terrance did not want to move and you seem fond of him so this was the next best thing."

"When did you have time for this? We just arrived last night," Harry asked baffled. He hadn't even unpacked.

"I had it started after we talked on Saturday." Ah, minions. Of course. "I wanted it done yesterday, but alas, even magic can't solve it all"

Harry opened the door to the apartment and stopped. A short hallway leads to the living room already fully furnished with couches and a coffee table. He could see a sliding door that led to a balcony. To the left of the living room was a full kitchen with normal sized fridge and stove. It was perfect.

"And the contract?" Harry asked because he couldn't have this and then have it taken away. It would destroy him. Riddle passed him the deed. It was in his name.

"It's yours. I'll take care of the bills as long as you are working for me. We can write a contract for that tomorrow. But this place will always be yours to come back to."

*Mine .*

Harry almost asked Riddle for a moment alone but in a show of trust, he allowed Riddle to see him vulnerable. To see him emotional and softly caressing the counters. So few things were his that to feel possessive almost felt foreign.

"Let's make dinner," Harry said in a bid to hold out his tears until he was alone. It was a great idea until he remembered he had nothing in this new apartment. "Let's go shopping!" He changed it. He'll have to go back to his old apartment to pick up a few things and cancel his lease but that could wait.

Riddle smiled softly at him. "Yes. Let's."

"Why are you doing this?" Harry asked as they put the groceries away.

"Putting the groceries away?" Riddle asked as he hesitated with a bag of pasta before storing it in a cabinet.

Harry turned to the cabinets because it was easier to have this conversation if he wasn't looking at Riddle. "No, giving me an apartment."

Riddle stopped and simply said. "I like you."

Harry snorted as he sorted the cans.

"You think I don't?" Riddle questioned as he put a cereal box away.

Harry shrugged. He unpacked another bag and started sorting it.

"I like you," Riddle repeated.

Harry rolled his eyes. "Oh, I know you like me. I know you do. You find me funny and smart and even witty sometimes."

"But?" Riddle prodded.

"It doesn't mean you would do this for me. Hell, you would kill me if you felt it was necessary. Sure you'd be sad, maybe even angry at me for "making" you do it. But you wouldn't hesitate."

Riddle didn't even bother to deny it. "If you feel that way, why even talk to me?"

Harry could say that Riddle hadn't given him much of a chance but while true it felt like a cop-out. Like not taking responsibility for his choices. "I like how you treat me right now," Harry settled in. "And if we became enemies, I feel you'd kill me with something painless like an Avada to my face. Believe me, that's way more consideration than most people." Most people are trash.

Riddle stilled. "And yet you'd still have sex with me."

"Yes. That does speak poorly about me and my life choices," Harry lamented as he moved to the fridge items.

Riddle abruptly closed the door to the fridge leaving Harry with a cheese block in his hand. "Is that all you are interested in?"

"Are you asking if sex is the only thing I'm interested in with you at the moment?" Harry checked, just to confirm they were having the same conversation.

"Yes."

"Then yes."

Riddle put a hand on top of his heart in faux hurt. Harry could tell this wasn't news to Riddle. "Not even a second of hesitation."

Harry shrugged. "Why lie? You are not interested."

"No," Riddle corrected. "I'm not interested in what you are offering *right now* ."

"And what are you interested in? Because to be honest, gifting an apartment is not something you do for an acquaintance you like," Harry asked. Riddle hadn't done this with anyone, ever.

"You. I want you. Completely or not at all."

"To be clear, you are saying you want me sexually also? Because I've gotten mixed signals."

"Completely," Riddle repeated. "Or not at all."

Harry mulled on that. "Are you sure? It would be short but fun," Harry tempted one last time.

"I don't want short and fun with you."

That Harry knew.

Harry turned his back to Riddle and opened the fridge again to store the cheese. He breathed out slowly and made a choice. "Ok. It will be not at all."

"For now," Riddle agreed with a warning. "You might change your mind in the future."

Harry hesitated.

"What?" Riddle demanded.

"I don't want you staying hoping for a future that might never come," Harry carefully said.

"I'm not staying. You made your point clear the first time and I have more self-respect than that. I'm dating other people. You can't have it

both ways. You can't say no, I don't want a relationship with you, I just want a casual night, and also not want me to date when I say that it is not what I want."

Fair. Harry was pretty fucked up for both wanting desperately to not be abandoned and unable to offer more. "Lucy is pretty great." Horrible to hate because there wasn't anything particularly hateable about her but Harry kind of hated her anyway.

"She is and I'm lucky she's more flexible about dating exes than you are." Harry snorted in amusement but kept his gaze fixed on the counter.

"Harry," Harry looked up. "I want you in my life. But you said one chance. Forgive me if I don't want to waste it on a short fling that you will forget the moment I step out of your life."

Harry could almost taste the amount of words Riddle wasn't saying. A whole sea of unsaid things washing to his shores. It would be easy to dive in and know every word Riddle wasn't saying. But he wasn't ready to hear it so he ignored it.

"Ok."

Pike accompanied him later that night to look for his things and for much-needed support after that heavy conversation with Riddle.

"That obsession he has with you ain't normal," Pike said after explaining his own conversation with Riddle. "If you were anyone else, I'd be worried."



"And since it's me?"

"I'm worried about him."

## Chapter End Notes

I wrote a lot of this chapter when I started this story. I've always known that this is not a couple I can throw together and hope it works out. It simply won't. They are two hot messes and it would collapse before it could begin. Riddle would jump over all of Harry's triggers like he was playing jumping rope. And I can't see Harry trusting Riddle easily and going oh yeah, that sociopath known for lying and faking relationships? totally boyfriend material. I need to buff out the rough edges before that. But tell me your thoughts on it.

## Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

## Chapter 19

Harry woke up with his heart hammering. His eyes searched the room he was in and his hand reached for a weapon before awareness kicked in and he calmed down. His new apartment. He fell back to the bed with a layer of sweat and put his arm over his eyes.

*Green eyes.*

*I'm fine* , Harry responded to the silent query as his heart rate slowly calmed. He touched the soft sheets and warm comforter as he breathed. He checked the time on his phone, 4am. No time like now to wake up. He wasn't going to be able to sleep again anyway.

He let his fingers brush the walls as he walked toward the bathroom and spent a minute looking at the granite countertop of the bathroom vanity. The stone glimmered. He'll have to look into stone-safe cleaning spells.

Making coffee was almost a ritual as he carefully measured the ingredients and poured the water. He watched in silent amazement as each drop fell into the decanter. He was unable to pull his eyes away from the mundanity he hadn't experienced in years. When had he started taking for granted all the things he never had growing up?

He enjoyed the gradual golden glow over the sleepy neighborhood buildings with a cup of coffee on his new balcony. He showered in

scalding hot water and got ready for the day feeling the unfamiliar sensation of peace itching under his skin. He knocked on Riddle's door at eight so that they could floo to the ministry together.

"I thought we could have breakfast together here before leaving," Riddle suggested as he opened the door already dressed for the day in dark blues, the pan sizzling in the background and a cloud of delicious smells leaving the apartment.

"What are you making?" Harry asked as he entered the apartment. He could smell the caramelized onions from the door. He dropped his things on the counter, took his outer layer off, and immediately started taking out the plates and making the table to help out.

"How did you sleep?" Riddle asked as he poured him coffee in what Harry now knew was 'his' coffee cup as Riddle always served him in the same blue cup.

"Fine."

Riddle raised an unbelieving eyebrow. "Really? You woke up agitated."

What a polite way of saying panicked. Harry shrugged as he served himself more scrambled eggs. "New place." A Riddle's prodding look, he added. "It's quiet here at night. I'll get used to it."

"I'm guessing it wasn't quiet in Vomit Alley?"

"Nah, there was always noise."

Screams for help, bangs on the walls, loud music, teenagers being obnoxious, and fights. Lots and lots of fights. Harry had learned the first year to not go for the screams for help because they were lures to trap victims. Real Vomit Alley residents knew not to scream for help. The depressing cacophony of noise was inescapable since the building structure was so shaky that putting a simple noise-canceling spell would bring down a wall.

It had gotten a bit better after the demon moved in. No one wanted to bring the attention of the demon to them. Apparently, it wasn't just any old demon but one of the big guys. Harry made it a point not to know, not to find out, not to care. The demon made it safer for Harry as his neighbor and for the area in general so Harry wasn't complaining to the Aurors. The demon was an interesting case study of how 'human' is not always better.

Harry found it incredibly amusing in a detached sort of way. The demon's (adopted?) kid could enter a Vampire lair and he would be gently shown the exit with a lollypop and directions to his apartment complex. Sometimes the five-year-old was personally escorted to his apartment by the leader of whatever gang he stumbled on just so that there were no misunderstandings. Hilarious. But the rotting bodies did get old quickly. A great way of sending a clear message to enemies, but horrible for Harry that was one of the few that still lived in the building undaunted by the demon. But demon or no demon, Vomit Alley will always be Vomit Alley.

Harry was glad to be out. He knew he was incredibly privileged because most people never got out. His counterpart never got out.

Riddle set his cutlery down. "What are you thinking that is making you depressed?"

Harry hadn't noticed he had stopped eating and was staring blankly at

the table. He straightened up and started eating again. "I sometimes think of the person I was before the memory loss. Of who he was."

Riddle stared at him in silence until Harry broke. "I find it unfair that I got all of this," he gestured vaguely to the room to encompass everything he had, a nice apartment, a good-paying job, and awesome friends, "and he didn't."

Riddle frowned. Harry could almost feel an echo of his own words tumbling in Riddle's mind as he processed them. "Who he was?"

"Yeah."

Riddle spent an uncomfortable amount of time staring at Harry unblinkingly. "Do you feel as if he was someone else?" Riddle finally asked.

Always. "Sometimes."

Riddle narrowed his eyes. "And that he died and you lived?"

"Basically."

Riddle stared silently for an uncomfortably long moment. "So you feel survivor's guilt?"

Harry felt his breath catch. "Yeah, like survivor's guilt." Riddle was too smart for Harry's own good.

"Can you have survivor's guilt with yourself?" Riddle wondered.

"But was it me?" Harry pressed. "As far as I know, no one knew him. No family or friends. Maybe Charlie Weasley knew him at some point but he sure as hell didn't miss him. He could've been passionate about dance, or wrote songs and sang them in the shower. He could have been exactly as I am now or a completely different person. We'll never know. He died."

"Harry," Riddle said slowly, gently. "You didn't die."

"I didn't. He did. The Harry Potter that lived with his parents and went to Hogwarts and decided to fuck off and work at the Ministry died. He's not coming back. For all effects and purposes, that version of me died."

Riddle thought carefully before he spoke, "You mourn him?"

"I guess so. I find it a tragic end."

Riddle mulled on that for a few minutes as they went back to eating. Harry was glad Riddle did not further question how he sees his "past" self as a separate entity.

"Would you feel differently to find out if he was exactly like you but with memories?" Riddle tried. Harry guessed that he would use his pull to dig out every memory of this world's Harry Potter from his birth to the last day someone saw him. But since Harry wasn't being as straightforward about why he felt how like a different person, he wouldn't feel better.

"No," Harry answered truthfully. "I would still feel like a separate person from the one that died."

Riddle kept eating and Harry assumed the conversation was over. "I think he would be happy and proud of you," Riddle finally responded.

Would he?

"I hope so."

"We could make a headstone for him," Riddle offered hesitantly. "Would it make you feel better?"

Harry thought about it. "Yeah. I think so. He deserves to have some mark in the world."

Harry deflated a bit.

Riddle drummed his fingers on the table with irritation. "What?"

"He'd have no visits." Harry will visit for sure. But maybe Pike and Martinez will find it too morbid. Or hitting too close to home. No one else will even know about it.

"We'll visit. I can both be grateful he gave me you and sad to never have met him." Riddle paused. "You used to go to therapy, right?"

"Yeah. I should go back, shouldn't I?" Harry couldn't even blame Riddle for mentioning it when he was talking about a separate, dead Harry Potter.

Riddle looked relieved. "Big changes trigger strong emotions. We can floo their office and schedule weekly meetings."

Harry hummed in agreement. "Have you ever been to therapy?"

"Yes. I had a therapist in my early thirties. I had a lot of...rage at the moment. Sadly he moved out of the country overnight and changed his name." Harry laughed and Riddle smirked. Good self-preservation. "But before that, I learned a lot from him."

"Like what?" Harry asked curiously. Had that been a turning point in this Universe? Probably not. Turning points are too complicated to be caused by one person at one time.

Riddle seemed reluctant to share but Harry had already shown his guts and he wasn't going down alone. "I think the biggest is that emotions aren't good or evil. Emotions only show a want, a desire, or a need. You can be furious because you want things to be different. Or blindly jealous that someone else has something you desire. Emotions simply are. Actions are good or bad." Riddle paused as if unsure to overshare. "Also that thoughts are private and that I shouldn't readily share when I want to murder or torture someone."

Harry hummed. "Good advice. Do you know where he is right now?"

"Of course."



"You know what would be really nice?" Harry grinned mischievously. "Sending him a postcard."

Riddle laughed and his eyes sparkled with a wicked glint. "We can pick one up on the way to the Ministry. I have things to do in Diagon Alley first before we head to the office."

They used the stairs to head to the street and the stores below and luckily met Gilbert on the way. Gilbert was happy to know that Harry was the new neighbor as he had been worried about all the fuss. Harry asked about his son's new promotion and they had a short chat before Riddle started making noises about being late for work.

"Why do you like Gilbert so much?" Riddle grumbled as he threw one last long look at the old man.

"Remember the first time I visited? I apparated on the street and walked in. I met Gilbert in the lobby. He said hello and called me a dapper young man."

Riddle waited. He frowned. "That's it?" Riddle demanded.

"Of course that's it. I'm still riding that high."

Riddle stopped him in front of the lobby's mirror and stood behind him, "For the record," he told Harry while looking at the mirror, "you are breathtaking."

Harry looked at the mirror doubtfully and in consequence, looked at Riddle's reflection skeptically. He was fine. It's not that he had low self-esteem but he wasn't delusional either. He wasn't anyone's

definition of breathtaking. Maybe for those that liked the wide-eyed younger brother type or looked at Bambi and thought *I'd hit that* well then, Harry was very attractive. Harry was pleased to know that Riddle was one of the select few in that worrying category.

"Still no sex?" Harry confirmed just in case.

Riddle's hands on his shoulders twitched, "Still no sex."

"Just checking. You can't say that sort of thing and not take me to bed after. It's rude," Harry commented, partly as a joke. Mostly not.

"*That* there is what I really enjoy."

Harry raised an eyebrow, "My impeccable sense of humor?" He ventured. He was pretty funny. Mostly due to trauma but he'll take a compliment.

Harry watched the mirror's reflection as Riddle's hand hovered over the side of his mouth. "That irreverent mouth," Riddle finally said.

Riddle's fingers carefully went up to his temple. Still hovering without touching. "Those observant eyes that never miss a thing. That brilliant brain that just wants to relax but can't help solving puzzles and tumbling into adventures in pursuit of the unknown." Riddle continued as he carded his fingers through Harry's curls and dragged him back until Harry was resting against Riddle's chest. "*That* , Harry," he whispered in Harry's ear while looking at him in the mirror, "is incredibly sexy."

"Is it really?" Harry a bit breathlessly. That irreverent mouth as Riddle

called it got him in trouble more often than not.

"Yes. I could have someone polyjuiced as you and it would never come close to you. You see people as they are. You see *me* as I am. It's not a flattering look but you don't look away. You see the monstrous and the human and still sit down over coffee to discuss whatever is on your mind that day. You laugh with me and *at* me. So yes, Harry, you are gorgeous, but that is not even half of it. Do you know how rare you are? Do you think I'll ever find someone like you if I let you go? I'm not so willing to take the chance. You don't consider me for a partner and that's your decision of course, but I will strive to be someone you call yours. Whatever relationship you give me will be invaluable." Riddle dropped his hand and stepped a hair breath away. "Do with that what you will."

"Goddamn it Riddle, it's not even nine in the morning," Harry grouched and pushed Riddle back with his elbow to get some breathing space. Harry was only human and with a limited amount of restraint that Riddle was quickly consuming. Harry fixed his ruined curls and grumbled about people with straight hair thinking they can comb their fingers over curly hair and not create a puffball to get his mind off its favorite track, sex.

Harry only gave himself a second to think over Riddle's words before yeeting them out of his brain. Smooth talking bastard; could convince a frog not to ribbit. Riddle always does things elevated to the nth level, doesn't he?

Don't like the government? Total hostile takeover. Dislike you? Mortal enemies. Like you? Obsessed.

A complete and total lack of moderation in every facet of his life. *Ridiculous man* , Harry thought fondly.

"Come on," Harry turned and pushed Riddle to the door. "We have to buy something for Gilbert."

Riddle let the subject change without complaint. "Why?"

"It's his birthday next week."

Riddle looked extremely confused. "How...?" He sighed. "Never mind. I know a good wine store."

They arrived at almost ten in the morning at the Ministry. The minions were in a tizzy and a search party had been almost sent out. Draco was glaring at Harry, probably unfairly blaming him for Riddle's once-in-a-century tardiness. Harry hadn't been the one asking all sorts of questions about the aroma and age of two almost identical wines. Harry wouldn't know the questions much less understand the answers.

Harry winked at Draco as they walked away. So cute baby Draco. That got him thinking, "I haven't seen Malfoy father in a while," Harry commented idly as they walked towards the office. Sure it was only Tuesday but Lucius was basically a carpet in Riddle's office. It was jarring not to see him as part of the background.

"Don't worry about him," Riddle responded.

Well. He hadn't been worried. Now he's worried. Not that he was going to do something about it.

Thoughts and prayers to Lucious Malfoy.

Like a curtain falling, Riddle got into work-mode. "How's the remodeling of the new wing?"

Harry sighed and also got his Assistant mask on. "Going smoothly. There's a project overview on your desk if you want us to go over it."

"Did you contact-"

"- Mr. Wilson? Yes. You have a meeting next week."

"Has the new Auror budget been approved?"

"Amended and approved." Heavily amended. Almost written over. And approved the same day by Head Auror Martinez before anyone could read it too closely.

"Do we have new contractors?"

"I put a list on your desk with the best ten companies."

Riddle side-eyed him. Harry smiled placidly. Riddle would take him away from that apartment dead.

As they were starting late Harry had to run around the entire Ministry to get everything ready for the day. Dropping and picking up sensitive documents and folders from all floors. It was inevitable that he ran into old ghosts.

First, it was Molly.

She looked so young to Harry. She was probably barely sixty and still had mostly red hair.

"Molly!" Harry called in surprise at seeing the woman looking lost on the first floor. Harry shifted the papers on his arm to be more comfortable as he approached her.

She looked relieved to see him. "Ah, Harry, dear. How are you? Haven't seen you since you were a little boy."

Harry's smile dimmed for a second before regaining strength. "I'm well. Are you looking for Arthur?"

She hesitated as she cleaned her palms on one of her more formal long skirts. "No, darling, I'm looking for the employment office."

"Sure, I can take you there," Harry started walking and Molly hesitantly followed. Riddle will have to wait a few more minutes. "Are you interested in a job in the ministry?"

She anxiously straightened her clothes. "Oh, it's silly. I just figured, with everyone out of the house, maybe I can do something? Nothing big, of course. I don't have any work experience. But I figure I have a lot of home experience so I can clean or cook at the cafeteria. I'm good at making large batches of food you see."

He knew.

"I'm sure you cook delicious, Mrs. Weasley," Harry responded honestly

with a bruised heart at the face of the woman he once saw as a mother figure. He swallowed his melancholic thoughts and forced a cheerful smile, "but I have a better idea if you are interested."

Harry changed directions. "I think you'd do wonderfully in the Auror department. Come, let's talk to Head Auror Martinez. He can give you a tour and help you with the papers."

"The Auror department?" She laughed nervously. "I doubt they want an old lady like me, Harry."

Harry hummed. "Did you know that there are currently twenty-three magical children missing just here in London? The youngest is just four months old. He was taken last week."

She gasped and her eyes watered. "That many?" She whispered brokenly.

Harry nodded as he gently steered her to the elevators with a hand on her upper back. "Yes, if not found in the first twenty-four hours their chances of ever being found are dim."

"That's horrible. Who would do such a thing?"

"That's exactly what the Search and Rescue team works to find out. They need dedicated team members that go the extra mile to bring those kids home. Right now they are understaffed and struggling. Fortunately, they just got the budget increased and can hire. Sadly not many want such depressing work."

Her spine straightened and her eyes sharpened. Harry knew there was

no better person for the job. Those kids will be found one way or another and families will have closure.

Then it was Hermione. She ran to him the moment she spotted him alone in a hallway and manhandled him to a corner.

Harry bemusedly followed. "Hi, Hermione. Um, nice seeing you?"

"Harry, hi. Listen, I need you to help me enter the Atlantis project. It's the discovery of the century and I want to be there."

"Really?" Harry asked excitedly. "I can tell you a bit about it before my next meeting."

She looked at him with exasperation, "Harry, I just need you to get me in contact with the people running it."

"Well, actually, I can tell you all about it. We can meet after work maybe?"

She looked at him with thinly veiled irritation. "Harry, really, what could you possibly know about it? You didn't even make it to runes class. Don't be silly, I've read a lot about the subject and the Project Leader can inform me of the rest."

Harry hummed noncommittally and some of his frostiness must have shown on his face because she backtracked some.



"I mean. Don't get me wrong. It's great you are even involved! I was surprised that the paper mentioned you by name. How in the world did you manage it? Are you part of the clean-up crew or the organization team?"

Ouch. Harry put some distance between them.

"Hermione, I'm fairly busy right now. I'll see about it and let you know."

She grabbed his arm as he was leaving. Her nails bit his skin. "Harry," she snapped. "This is important. It might not mean much to you but it means a lot to me. This could make my career."

Harry yanked his arm and left.

"Harry!" She yelled to his back.

Harry had been fine. He had mourned all he had to mourn, had moved on, and accepted that he had lost his first-ever friends and that the ones that walked this world with their faces weren't them. But now he felt like he was drowning in fresh grief. He couldn't breathe from its weight.

Harry heard Riddle ask through a fog. "What happened Harry?"

"Allergies," Harry croaked as he cleaned his face. "Excuse me, I'll make some tea to help it."

Harry made it to the small kitchenette to the side of Riddle's office on

autopilot. He breathed and willed himself to stop. He was at work. This wasn't the time. He breathed again.

Grief doesn't care about time or work.

He lowered his head to his arms and cried. It was like it was the first day all over. He was aware enough to block Riddle and turn his brain into a shell. Like he was inside an egg that he could hide in. Safe and protected. He was back inside the cupboard. The door was locked and there was no one but him. It was dark and dusty but he was safe.

Riddle followed him. Harry did not expect Riddle to be good at consoling but he didn't expect him to be so bad. Harry wetly laughed at how awkward Riddle was being. After a few minutes of Riddle silently panicking and patting his back as if Harry was a dog and it not working, Riddle reached into Harry's outer pocket and grabbed his phone.

Next thing Harry knew Martinez was hugging him and Harry broke down into little pieces he had no hope of ever piecing together. Pike passed him a glass of water when he calmed down. Riddle had left at some moment. Harry appreciated it.

With the help of a calming potion, Harry pulled himself together and went back to work. That's what he did. What he has always done. The world had never stopped to let him cry. He was a ball that was always expected to bounce back. He was pale, withdrawn, and red-eye, but he finished with the trial papers of the first accused.

"Do you want me to kill her?" Riddle asked seriously.

Harry looked at Riddle bitterly, "You wouldn't kill Umbridge but you'd kill Hermione?"

"Umbridge didn't make you sad."

Ridiculous man. "No. I don't want you to kill her." Harry kept working sullenly.

"I just said I would kill for you and you had no reaction," Riddle pointed out.

Harry side-eyed him. "You would kill out of boredom. Abstain from killing and that would truly impress me."

Riddle tsked. "You always ask too much."

Silence.

"How about you come to have dinner at my house?" Riddle tried again. "We could work on your ritual."

Harry sighed. He was mentally exhausted and in no mood to put his brain to work. "Yeah. Ok." The deadline was close. He would have to push it back, and thus his graduation if he didn't present by end of the year.

"How do you even know who it was?" Harry wondered once his brain caught up.

"Ms. Granger is screaming to the high heavens that you are

discriminating against her participation in the Atlantis project because she is a woman and this is a boy's club. And for some reason, she thinks you are the Recruitment person and she vowed to talk to a higher-up and have you fired."

"Yeah. Ok. Makes sense. And technically yeah, I'm the recruiter...and the organizer, and the cleaner."

"But would it make you *feel* better if I killed her?" Riddle tried again.

"No."

"Would it make you feel better if I killed Umbridge?"

Harry looked at Riddle with a spark of interest. "And put her soul in a hellscape painting and hang it in a muggle bathroom?" He checked with narrowed eyes.

"Sure. If it makes you feel better. We'll do it on Friday... After her trial."

Harry glared at Riddle in annoyance but was sufficiently distracted. "Goyle can do the painting."

Riddle looked blankly at Harry not understanding why Goyle would do the painting but nodded in agreement anyway. Harry's lips twitched upwards. So cute.

"Do you know how to recall souls that have already parted this

world?" Riddle asked. "I feel like I missed a lot of opportunities for... bathroom decor."

Harry thought about it. "I haven't tried it, but it should be possible. Summon the ghost from its eternal peace with some hella strong ritual and trap it in a hellscape. How hard can it be?"

On a truly momentous occasion that will probably never repeat again, they left work at five.

"I should have mental breakdowns more often," Harry commented idly.

Riddle twitched. "Please don't."

Riddle left him at his apartment after much fussing for a date with Lucy he had forgotten about, but only after Pike and Martinez arrived.

"You look like shit," Pike greeted with a bag of takeout.

"Thanks. Does that mean I pick the movie?"

"Nope. Nice apartment. The fuck? Is that the same chicken?" Martinez asked. Harry hesitantly nodded.

Martinez looked at Harry weirdly. "Wasn't it a conjuring?" Martinez checked. Harry winced and nodded. Everyone turned to look at the freshly arrived Claude from Lavender's house that was against all odds still alive and making noise in the chicken-friendly playpen.

They changed the subject and Martinez shoved Harry to the side of the couch so that he and Liliana could fit better. "We are watching Star Wars. Liliana hasn't seen them."

"Again?" Pike despaired and then perked up, "Shots every time they say force?"

"No. I need five to seven business days to revive from the weekend," Martinez shot down. "Same," Liliana agreed. Pike looked at Harry hopefully. Harry's horrified face at drinking tequila again was enough of an answer. Pike deflated.

"So, Pike," Harry said casually as he passed the popcorn, "did you hook up with Padma?" As one everyone turned to look at Pike and wait for the answer. The movie went on ignored.

Pike side-eyed him. "Out of the fucking blue why don't you. But no, of course not. She was drunk."

"Are there plans for the future?" Martinez asked curiously.

Pike scrunched his nose. "Don't think so. I think the age difference is too large, you know? She's in her twenties still. And kind of innocent, you know? She asked me about all the types of kinks after Harry's story and she had these big eyes as if she could hardly imagine it. But we'll see. I'm not ruling it out yet."

Harry nodded in understanding.

"You should ask Lavender out, tho," Pike threw it back at him. "She was trying to get you alone the entire weekend."

"I will. Tomorrow in fact," Harry decided.

They didn't talk about Harry's massive breakdown but he was squished between everyone. Martinez to his right, Pike to his left, and Leliana had settled between his legs on the floor. With the flimsy excuse of being too late (and conveniently ignoring they were Wizards), everyone stayed the night.

Harry was having a bit of difficulty with Claude the chicken. Not because it was difficult to care for a chicken. But because it was or it seemed to be alive. Claude was a magical construct that should have puffed away in hours. Harry knew it. Even Lavender with her insistence on pampering the chicken expected it to puff out at any moment. It hadn't. And seemed in no hurry to go. Harry had excused it to Lavender as summoning a chicken from a nearby chicken coop. And they were all drunk so who knows what he did. Lavender bought it because there was no other reasonable explication.

"What the fuck are ya?" Harry asked the chicken. At least it was dumb as a rock if not a bit vicious with anything that looked worm-shaped. It had no greater aspiration other than to eat. It even made Harry doubt he hadn't summoned the damn chicken. But even when Harry tried not to think about it, he knew that 'alive' and 'dead' were more *fluid* concepts around him.

"You have two choices. You can be my emotional support chicken or chicken tenders. What's it going to be?"

Empty eyes vacant of any intelligence tried to peck at the electrical cables.

"Suicidal. Perfect. You'll fit right in. My emotional support chicken it is."

## Chapter End Notes

I want to read something that is not written yet and I'm pleading to one of you kind souls to write it and tag me since I don't have the time to write it. I want to read a Wednesday and Buffy the vampire crossover where Buffy is her original bubbly cheerleader self (no her later more serious personality due to trauma) and the Addams family are moving to Hell's mouth because of the good vibes. They can be teenagers at school, young adults at university or working together. Buffy is her bubbly self and no one understands why Wednesday-death-is-my-salvation is obsessed with girly girl miss popular Buffy. Wednesday is of course seeing Buffy kill many things without sweating, and with ruthless efficiency, natural talent and adaptability. Wednesday has many tips on how to clean the blood off Buffy's Channel bag and Botulin toxin (for botox injections) so Buffy is interested. Wednesday absolutely simping Buffy and raising a shrine in her honor. Of course Wednesday is disappointed Buffy stopped the apocalypse when she was dressed in her carefully chosen death outfit but seeing Buffy defeat the literal Devil made up for it. Please someone write this ♥️📖 I need this ship.



# Chapter 21

## Chapter 20

Harry saw the red letter and immediately began chanting a whispered *oh no, oh no, oh no* as he looked for the nearest exit. There was no question of who was sending the letter as there was only one person he had been dodging. Too late. The letter exploded and the shrill familiar voice of his thesis advisor was heard.

"POTTER! You've ignored me for the last time! If you don't have a lawyer, contracts, and the ritual you promised me, you won't be graduating this year. Do not test me on this!"

Harry looked in resignation as the ashes dispersed. The room was deathly silent and everyone was looking at Harry. Harry laughed nervously to defuse the tension, "Sorry about that. My thesis advisor can be a bit...explosive. Please continue the meeting."

Riddle took control of the meeting and the moment passed, but Harry knew it was long from forgotten. He would be receiving so much shit about it from the likes of Malfoy, Snape, and Lestranger that he already had a headache.

"Why didn't you use the lawyer I recommended?" Riddle asked when the meeting was over.

"I can't afford that lawyer even if I sold one of my kidneys, part of my liver, and donated plasma for a year. I checked. He also didn't accept my thirty-year payment plan."

"And the school doesn't help at all?"

Harry scoffed. "Of course not. I pay them for the pleasure of stomach ulcers."

"Why didn't you say anything?"

Harry stared at Riddle incredulously. "What would I say?" Harry scoffed. "Hey, boss of mine, whom I've known for a few months, pay for this really expensive thing on top of the other really expensive things you are already paying for? Why? No reason. I just can't pay for it myself so you should pay for it at no benefit to you. That would be as ridiculous as it sounds."

Had Riddle *offered* to pay that would have been a different matter, but Harry wouldn't *ask*. As Aunt Petunia would say, that was crass. The line between pragmatic and kept man is paper thin but should, all the same, be respected.

Respected-ish at least.

Given due consideration at a minimum. A hesitant pause before accepting that conveyed that the matter was not foregone.

"Harry, I don't need to pay him if you are uncomfortable with that." Harry was not uncomfortable with that, but he did not comment. "I have information that the lawyer will not want public and we can make a mutually beneficial contract," Riddle offered.

"...That's fine then."

Riddle seemed to have a bit of whiplash from his easy acceptance and paused to see if Harry would protest the blackmail or give any conditions.

Harry shouldn't find that charming.

Riddle still didn't get the lengths Harry was willing to go to not only survive but thrive in this new world. This time Harry didn't have a vault full of gold to welcome him to a new, strange world full of peril. Harry could literally not afford to give a damn. He would starve before being a burden to his friends, but everyone else? Fair game.

"I know that you sent letters to experts, did they ever respond?"

"One responded with a cease and desist letter. Another sent a Howler laughing." Just laughing. Nothing else. That one hurt more than the cease and desist letter.

"Give me their names. I'll *ask* them," Riddle responded with narrowed eyes.

"Sure, I'll make you a list," Harry said as he began to write names, and as much as Harry tried to keep his thoughts private his traitorous mind couldn't help overthinking the matter. The suspicion and the paranoia not allowing him to simply be happy with the offer.

*Why are you helping me? If I fail and have to repeat, you'll have me for longer. Isn't that what you want?* The thought was loud and clear with all the suspicion and doubt he held towards Riddle.

"Harry," Riddle stepped forward. Harry looked up from his list. "I said voluntarily if at all possible," Riddle reminded him. Even as Harry's face was neutral, his skepticism overflowed from behind his shields. Harry would accept any help Riddle was willing to give like the street rat he has always been but it did not mean he trusted either Riddle or his intentions.

Riddle sighed. "You'll find that out yourself eventually."

Harry changed the subject.

In short order, they had a date and time and were sending out invitations. It would have gone faster had Riddle not questioned each and every one of them. Judgemental prick.

"Why did you invite the manager of the Quidditch shop?" Riddle asked, baffled.

"Because, Riddle, fucking Johnson is a tactical genius and if I can get him to help me this will go from a remote possibility to a reality. The problem will be convincing him." Johnson was lazy as shit.

" *Goyle?* "

"Of course. He's the one that figured out that sand was the best medium. He's a co-creator."

"I find that hard to believe."

"Believe it."

"Lavender?"

"Don't you know? She created the Cinderella spell. It's a complex multilayer spell that affects three different sites without interference. It targets hair, makeup, and wardrobe each one working together to create a cohesive look that takes into consideration the event and taste. It's a fucking whale of a spell. It's criminal she didn't get an Order of Merlin for it."

Riddle did not look like he heard anything Harry said. "Even so, spell creation and ritual creation are two completely separate branches of magic."

"So? She's smart and she could see the problem from a different perspective. Sometimes it's good to have new eyes."

"She's going to distract you," Riddle protested.

Harry's face closed. "It's not up to debate. Finish with the list already."

"Mike Petterson? I don't recognize that name."

"He's from Control of Magical Creatures," Harry explained. "We had a meeting with him last Wednesday. Short, skinny, with thick glasses, remember?"

Riddle's blank gaze said no. "There's no possible way you can justify

him."

"Of course, I can, he's Susan's husband," Harry said looking at Riddle as if this was something Riddle should have known.

Riddle looked at Harry.

Harry looked at Riddle.

"Ok, I'll bite, why is it important to have Susan's husband invited? And while you are at it, who's Susan?"

"Susan is the unofficial head of all the secretaries and assistants of the Ministry. If I want any chance of entering their world I have to impress Susan. And it's almost impossible to talk to Susan so I have to go through her husband."

"...should I even bother to ask why?"

"You wouldn't understand but they hold the keys to everything. Once I'm in with Susan nothing will be able to stop me. I'll have unlimited power inside the Ministry," Harry enthused with fervor.

Riddle looked at Harry as if he was the most idiot man to ever walk on Earth. "Harry..." Riddle gave up before starting. "Never mind. So Mike makes it thirty. Anyone else?" Riddle asked with a resignation that would scare any psychologist into action.

Harry, oblivious, answered. "No, I think we're good."

Riddle knocked on his door early to help set up. He held a container of strawberries to Harry, "I'm told they are good for ritual creation," Riddle explained with a smile.

Harry smiled, took the strawberries, and welcomed him in. He watched Riddle walk inside.

Hell.

He was going to hell. Harry sighed. At least Riddle will also be there. They could also not-flirt there to make the torture spicier.

In hindsight, Harry had not thought this out well. Granted, that can be said of any of his plans but this plan in particular felt worse than usual. There were too many people. Everyone from the list showed up. Harry had not taken into consideration that a summon from Riddle made it non-voluntary. And then somehow (his meddlesome thesis advisor) word had gotten around of the plan and many more had volunteered. Or straight showed up without warning.

Harry did not have the heart to turn them away when they explained their motivation. Many had stories of a loved one being the victim of curses that with the correct ritual could have been saved if only there have been time. But custom-made rituals can take weeks to make and that's only if you had the know-how. They figured that if there was even a slight chance of this working that they had to try. After all, it was better to pool their smarts to create this monstrosity than to create a custom ritual specific to the curse in a rush every time it was needed. Harry was a sucker for a sob story so the place was overfilled.

Even leaving the doors of both apartments open to let people freely flow from one apartment to another and commandeering the hallway (to Gilbert's great distress) it was not enough space.

They packed like sardines in Riddle's apartment to go over the plan. Harry had to explain his artificial intelligence spell and what he had of the ritual so far so many times that he lost his voice. He had to raise his hands in surrender when the experts questioned specific parts of his work. "Don't know. Tried it once and it worked. So," Harry shrugged, "that was that."

"It felt right," also made its appearance more than once. Harry had seen many rituals work, not work or cause disastrous results. Even not understanding the *whys* he saw the patterns. It was tedious but once everyone was on the same page they got to work.

"We have to divide the group," Riddle reached the inevitable conclusion.

"Everyone," Harry howled and then whistled when that wasn't enough. When he had the attention of most, he said, "If you work better with music, talking and overall chaos go to the apartment on the left. The ones that need silence and organization stay here in Mr. Riddle's apartment. If you bother our neighbor Gilbert in any way I will find you and make your life a living hell. Thank you."

Riddle closed his eyes in exasperation and when he opened them he took a long hard look in the direction of Gilbert's apartment. "That's not a productive way of organizing," Riddle criticized testily. "We should have done it by specialty."

"Nonsense. This is perfect. People that work with background noise and people that don't are mutually exclusive and never mix well together."

Riddle sighed but made a hand motion to get everyone moving. It



wasn't a perfect half-and-half division but Harry had not expected it to be. He had bargained that he would have the smaller group to his smaller apartment but to his growing concern, there were more and more people walking to his apartment. Harry started moving and shrinking his furniture to make a large space in the middle of his living room that they could work in. Even so, people spilled out to the kitchen and balcony. Claude was not a happy camper.

"What's this?" A man asked of Claude. If Harry was not wrong, the man was from the Department of Mysteries. The man crouched and used his pen to push the chicken.

"A fucking chicken. Stop poking it," Harry snapped.

"If that's a chicken, I'm a tree."

Harry put the chicken in his room and closed the door. Fucking scientists.

"Ok people," Harry called everyone to attention, "We are all aware that this is not a competition... but we aren't letting the losers over there win, are we?" The noise level increased as everyone whooped and cheered. Yes, these were Harry's people. It brought joy to Harry that everyone at Riddle's apartment could hear it.

Harry quickly banded with his fellow cult classics enthusiasts and bullied everyone from touching the music. Except for Lavender so they got the odd Usher, Britney Spears, and Spice girls mixed in. Harry's eyes dared anyone to complain.

As the night progressed and things got tense people shed their politeness and there were screaming matches, whispered heated arguments and even one person left the room crying. But there were

also shouts of joy and amazement as they uncovered a part of the puzzle. The music was turned on and off depending on the mood. The coffee maker was never turned off. Goyle had self-assigned the kitchen and had made tacos, burgers, and hotdogs.

"I got you a burger since I know tacos are off the menu," Riddle said as he offered a plate.

"Thanks," Harry responded distractedly and with one hand took the burger while the other one kept furiously writing. Harry looked up for a second, "You ate?"

"I'll eat later."

Harry nodded, "eat," he ordered Riddle and kept working.

"Why does your boss know your favorite foods? Mine doesn't even know my name," Mike commented when Riddle left. Harry was multitasking.

"That's because before he was my boss he was my creepy stalker," Harry responded as he ate the burger and worked on the ritual.

Mike raised his eyebrows. "That seems like a story."

"I'll tell you all about it. How about at lunch on Monday?" Harry asked hopefully.

Mike looked at Harry pointedly. "I know what you are doing. Many

had tried before...But I would have never gotten this opportunity otherwise, so yes, Harry, you, me, and Susan will have lunch on Monday." Harry can appreciate a fellow opportunist.

Harry waited until the man wandered off to make connections to celebrate with a small chair wiggle. Lavender raised her eyes from across the table and high-fived him.

"Did Riddle really stalk you?" She asked curiously.

Harry hummed.

She frowned. " *Why?* "

"Remember the news a few months back of how he got possessed?" Lavender nodded. "I was the one that noticed and he got a bit...fixated. He can be a bit like a niffler with gold when something catches his eye."

"...that actually explains so much."

Riddle forced Harry to take a break at around one in the morning when half the people had left. Now they were full instead of packed. Harry accepted on the condition that Riddle made him some of his fancy french press coffee. Riddle's apartment was a quiet hub of diligent work. Harry narrowed his eyes at team H's most recent breakthrough on the backboard and glared at the number one suspect.

"You used food against me," Harry accused as Riddle took out the cups and spoons.

Riddle smiled wickedly, "All is fair in love and war."

Before Harry could reach for his blue coffee mug someone passed by and swiped it without even a look back. They watched the cup leave in shocked silence. Harry looked to Riddle for instructions on how to proceed. The blue coffee mug was Harry's and Riddle was very... methodical. Riddle looked equally lost.

"I like the red one too. Very Gryffindor," Harry offered haltingly.

"It's not Gryffindor. It's Aztecán."

"Even better. Go," Harry nudged Riddle to move. "Get me the red not-Gryffindor one." Riddle did not move as he stared off to where the blue cup was. "Riddle," Harry called again. "Get me the red one. The coffee is getting cold."

Riddle snapped out of it and gave Harry the red coffee mug. He held it with one hand as he poured the coffee and did not let it go until it was safely in Harry's hand.

Harry knew better than to leave Riddle alone with Blue-cup-thief while it was still fresh on Riddle's mind so he took his coffee and went to do some spying of his own. The noise level never surpassed that of a library as conversations were had inside noise-canceling bubbles. Eerie.

Fucking Johnson was napping in a corner. Harry pocked him a few times and the man pretended to keep sleeping. Fucker probably chose to be here because it was easier to nap. Well, it's not like Harry could blame anyone for wanting to live an easy life. As Harry made a circuit around the room and saw some really good ideas. He chose the most promising one to try on the mock ritual on the floor.

"Hey! That's not ready," a woman exclaimed. Someone shushed her, "That's Harry Potter. It's *his* ritual."

Harry shrugged without stopping what he was doing. "We'll never know if we don't try it," he explained to the woman. Harry was a doer.

"See, I told you. It's not done. It failed," the woman harped as the light from the ritual faded.

Harry crouched to study the remains of the ritual. "It didn't fail. The heat turned the sand into crystals. We need something that can withstand the temperature emission."

Mike hesitantly cleared his throat. Harry looked at him. "Dragon scales," the man offered shyly at the sudden attention of the room. "They can be ground up and they easily withstand temperatures over 2000 degrees Celsius."

Harry stood up and turned towards Riddle with a shit-eating grin, "You heard the expert, Riddle. Get us ground-up dragon scales."

Riddle looked exasperated at Harry's smugness before rolling his eyes and smiling back at Harry. That will show Riddle not to doubt his picks. After Riddle made a few floo calls they had the ground dragon scales delivered to the apartment at 2 am by a nervous-looking owner of the Potion supplies store.

The scales worked. Another breakthrough.

Mike puffed up as everyone congratulated him and the woman, Irma, Harry learned. She was elderly and couldn't give two single shits about who Harry was or that Riddle could unalive her. Nice woman. Harry hoped they kept in touch after this.

The one-day event turned into a weekend-long marathon with less than a third of the original guests staying. Last-minute hotel rooms were booked and Harry's apartment was never empty. People took turns napping on his bed and on the sofa when they inevitably crashed.

"Why would you do this to us?" Someone asked Harry desperately. No one was being forced to be here but walking away from the discovery of the century was job suicide. "This is a yet uncovered layer of hell. On one hand, endless adulation. On the other, working day and night, trapped in a room with *people* ." It seems this person never worked in academia.

Still, Harry sympathized, "My toxic trait is having ideas I can't follow through and then making it everyone's problem," Harry answered sadly.

"You are despicable," the sleep-deprived, overcaffeinated man replied with all the sincerity his last surviving neuron could muster. Harry guided him to the nearest sofa and dropped a blanket on top of him. "I hate you," the man mumbled before falling unconscious.

"Why do you and Mr. Riddle have the same creepy paintings of skeletal beings being burned in your bathroom?" Harry was asked on day two.

"Because he wouldn't let me put them in muggle public bathrooms," Harry grouched. Public safety his ass.

Harry perked up. "Goyle made the paintings. Have you met Goyle?"

"The one making the food, was it yesterday?" The man frowned. "What day is today?"

Harry nodded. "Still Saturday," Harry clarified. "He's a really talented artist. He's the one that suggested sand."

"Did he really? That was ingenious. If it works, this will be the first ritual that doesn't use liquids."

"We really need to support upcoming artists. They think outside the box," Harry enthused. "He left already but I'll tell him to invite you to his next art exhibition."

As the sun rose on Sunday they saw the ritual work for the first time without disastrous results. It was a long way from the final product, but it now had legs to stand on.

"You did this," Riddle breathed as the light from the ritual dimmed.

"We did this," Harry corrected. And it is far from over. Some were talking about needing months-long testing and time for the AI to learn. "Riddle I don't have months," Harry worried. "I barely have weeks."

"Don't worry about it. What was it you said? It will get done if you wanted to get it done."

"I hope we are not counting on my luck because it's a hit-or-miss kind of thing."

Riddle laughed. It was the happiest Harry had seen the man.

Monday morning had Harry falling asleep on top of his breakfast.

Lucy surprised Riddle by showing up unexpectedly at his door with croissants.

"Are you and Riddle having sex?" Lucy asked the second Riddle left the room.

Harry blinked and his response got trapped in a large yawn. "No," he answered as he rubbed his face to wake up.

"Have you had sex?" Lucy pressed.

Harry looked towards the still-empty hallway. Coward. "No."

Lucy did not relent. "Is it on the horizon?"

Harry put jam on a toast, "No."

"Are you lying?"

Harry bit the toast and swallowed, "No."

Lucy did not look any more convinced than at the start of the conversation. "Look, you shouldn't worry. I can tell you with absolute certainty that I can lay naked in Riddle's bed and he would not touch me."

"Then how do you explain your relationship?" Lucy harped.

"I was the one that noticed the demon possession. You know how Riddle is; he gets fixated on things and people," Harry explained and for the first time in the conversation, Lucy relaxed marginally. "It's his way of expressing himself but he'll get over it quickly enough like always. Just let it run its course and before you know it he won't even care about me," Harry said confidently as he took another bite from his toast.

"I want you out of our relationship. You will say no when he invites you somewhere outside of work."



"Sure," Harry agreed easily. "That sounds reasonable."

Lucy relaxed and they continued breakfast in peace. "I heard you asked Lavender out," Lucy remarked with a smile. Either news traveled remarkably fast or the woman was more like Riddle than she appeared. "She's a nice girl."

Harry served himself more coffee from the pot and offered to serve Lucy, which she accepted. "She's the best," Harry said with a genuine smile. "I'm taking her to a glass-blowing beginners class at the store that recently opened in Diagon Alley. She's going to love it."

Lucy became much more agreeable after that.

# Chapter 22

## Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

## Chapter 21

Harry was born with the *what could go wrong?* gene, the *it doesn't seem that hard* mentality, and the *I could do that* attitude. Coupled with Dursely's survive-or-die method of raising and the finished product is too much audacity. So when Harry decided he will be the best assistant despite knowing nothing about the job, having never done anything similar, or even seeing anyone do the job it simply never occurred to him to doubt his success.

Like any new skill set, it required trainers and people to properly guide him. Achieving the impossible on the weekend did not excuse Harry from work or give him wiggle room to slack off during the week. But with Susan's seal of approval, the floor secretaries were more than happy to welcome Harry into their viper nest and train him in their ways. Each one was more ruthless than the next. Maria from the third floor gleefully told him over a cup of tea in the breakroom how she ruined her boss' political career by just letting the door ajar at the perfect moment. All because he couldn't remember her name after the fourth month. They showed him their ways and Harry was a dutiful student. Government slaves should ban together.

Being able to read his boss's mind, moods, and desires definitely gave Harry an unfair edge. And Harry abused it like steel drums during carnival week. Riddle had tea and snacks before he realized he was hungry. The latest update before the worry settled in. Riddle had the habit of thinking about what he needed to do every morning and Harry did his best to translate images into actions.

But he was only one man and couldn't do everything and be everywhere. In making his job run smoothly Harry had to train the

people around him so that he could delegate successfully. It was surprisingly similar to training Auror rookies. First, he had to create a reputation.

Harry had to make it known that making an enemy out of him always has consequences. Sadly, the consequences do not involve blood or mayhem but Harry can be adaptable. Papers can be so easily misfiled or accidentally pushed under the desk. Clumsy mistakes from a new assistant. He controlled Riddle's calendar and suddenly Mr. Malfoy is not able to have frivolous meetings with Riddle unless he schedules them with an unholy amount of time. And even then it's a touch-and-go situation.

Mr. Snape had his exorbitant potion budget cut in pieces because Harry took the time out of his busy schedule to calculate the costs and materials. Then he asked Snape if he could provide evidence of the need for the extra budget. Snape fought tooth and nail but could only regain less than a fraction back. Driving Draco spitting mad was more a hobby than a job but Harry still penciled it in. And Harry's favorite pastime, filling Riddle in on all the office gossip.

"Last year I did not choose McAvery as Senior Undersecretary because a rumor broke off that he was sleeping with his mistress in his office. You are saying that his secretary set him up to fail?"

Harry hummed in agreement. "If you want to know what real evil looks like that's Granny Mimi. She teaches me ways of torture my small mind could never have envisioned. Her last two bosses had to be interned in the Mental Ward. She takes gaslighting to an art form. But she likes me and has me call her Granny. I think I'm on her will now."

Granny Mini answered Harry's pressing question on what you do when you want to kill the people you work with but can't because it's a paper-pushing job and you need the income. Drive them insane, obviously, she had cackled. Make them doubt their reality until their

brain cracks.

Harry was almost sure Granny Mini was not human. The only things she knew about being a human seemed to only be found in psychology and torture books.

Harry stares at Draco unblinkingly. His eyes in no uncertain terms convey the message that if Draco adds one more thing to this meeting Harry will pickle his eyeballs and sell them as a delicacy. Draco wisely closed his mouth.

"Good then, if that is all, we can finish the meeting here," Harry said pleasantly with a dimpled smile. His raptor-like eyes turned to Draco one last time to make sure he got the message.

"I will be available from nine to ten to answer any questions." Harry's eyes warned anyone from using this time under the penalty of losing all of their paperwork for a month. Harry's eyes landed on Crabbe, known for not listening and then wasting time asking questions. Crabbe shook his head in fear.

Harry smiled sweetly, eyes scrunched and dimples in full display. "Wonderful." Only sweet baby Goyle returned his terrifying smile with a goofy smile. Bless him. He would kill for Goyle.

"Has anyone checked him for possession?" Draco grumbled under his breath as they were leaving.

"What was that, Mr. Malfoy?" Harry asked loudly bringing attention to their group, his smile widened, eyes almost not visible as he pushed his smile to the limits. "Do I need any help with the next *session* ? Why, yes. Thanks for offering."

Riddle helpfully nodded to confirm that Malfoy will be helping Harry

with the next session. Draco's eyes offered painful retribution. Harry silently mocked him with a bland, uncaring smile. It made a vein on Draco's forehead pop. Draco was always so fun.

"Is everything ready for tomorrow?" Riddle asked, distracting Harry from his stare off with Draco. Harry blinked back into existence and gave his boss the attention the man was demanding.

"Yes, the Italian Head of State and his group will stay at The Maxwell Hotel. Management has been notified of the last-minute changes they asked for."

"We just gained two powerful allies. The only reason they asked for a meeting is that we are a threat to that old fool," Riddle said with a pleased smile. He looked at Harry. "That meeting has to be perfect."

"It will be," Harry assured him. "Your best people are going over everything."

"You are not taking care of it yourself?"

Harry knew exactly three fucks about foreign policy. Riddle had entirely too much faith in him. "I know when to delegate," Harry answered simply. Riddle *would* sit him down for foreign politics class if he suspected.

It was mighty suspicious that on the eve of their Very Important Meeting with the Italian Government, the country's best for-hire hitman was walking the halls of the Ministry. Harry checked his watch. It was almost four thirty, too close to freedom to risk it. Harry will flip his ever-loving shit if he wasn't out of here by six.

Harry had also promised Martinez to start training after work this week. And now he had a possible assassination attempt just on the heels of the last assassination attempt. Harry will not deal with this shit today. He refused. Any more trial papers and he'll burn down the country.

With the angry glare of a busy worker who is not paid enough to deal with this bullshit, Harry made his way to the hitman without raising any red flags. Harry was just an angry, busy bee in a room full of angry, busy bees. Harry came up behind the man and with a spell that made the stack of papers in his hand weigh the equivalent of a small elephant he whacked the man in the back of his head. The man quickly plummeted. Harry shoved him to a nearby supply closet and put the strongest incarceration spell known to man or god.

And that's that.

He cleaned his hands, righted his papers, and went back to the office. He checked the calendar to see availability. This could be dealt with Wednesday at eleven in the morning. He wrote *deal with the supply closet* in neat letters and closed the agenda.

There. A problem for Harry of the future.

"I just don't think is fair for Margaret. John is her boss and as nice as he is, the power imbalance makes me uncomfortable," Harry said as they waited in line for Harry's ice cream.

Riddle's silence made Harry turn to look at the man. "We have a power imbalance," Riddle said.

A surprised bark of laughter escaped Harry. Riddle did not laugh. "Oh,

you are serious?" Harry asked with wide eyes.

Riddle grumbled. "You don't have to laugh that loud. A bit of respect for my position would not go amiss."

Harry looked at Riddle fondly. "Yeah, ok," Harry agreed easily. "But going back to John and Margaret."

Riddle huffed. "I'll go ahead and get the things we need for today. Lunch hour is almost over."

"Live a little, Riddle," Harry complained. Riddle left.

Harry had a vanilla ice cream cone in his hand when the attack happened. Very balsy. Right in the middle of the day in Diagon Alley. Harry looked at his vanilla ice cream and looked at the trash can nearby and it was an immediate no. Harry was going to eat his cone even if he had to fight one-handed. It was ten fucking Sickles. Too expensive to throw out.

He calmly followed the screams and lights to their source. Oh good, Riddle already had it taken care of. He leaned against a crumbled wall to eat his cone and watch as Riddle wiped the floor with his attackers. Riddle could have ended this fight at any moment but the man had a flair for dramatics and liked to play with his enemies like a well-fed cat that was bored at home. Harry thought it was overall good for Riddle to take out his aggression once in a while. If only to prevent the pot from overflowing.

Harry patiently waited as he savored his ice cream. It was as he bit into the cone and the resulting loud crunch that Riddle looked back for a second and sent him an irritated glare.

"Get behind my back."

How dramatic.

Harry dutifully got behind Riddle's very nice, very broad back and continued crunching on his cone. It was only when Harry was licking his fingers that the fight stopped.

"Where are you going?" Riddle asked, irritated.

Harry stopped midstep and blinked owlishly. "I want to try the strawberry ice cream. Maybe the store is still open," Harry hoped.

"If you didn't notice, we were attacked."

"I did notice. But *we* weren't attacked. *You* were attacked." And Harry was going to demand better health coverage if this was going to be a weekly thing.

"You could have helped."

Harry looked at Riddle uncomprehending, "why?" He asked baffled.

"You weren't worried about me?" Riddle asked and Harry wasn't sure if he was hearing genuine hurt there.



"I was worried about the infrastructure and about the cleanup." Harry was sure this was going to be a logistical nightmare and somehow his job to resolve. "You would have been fine even if they had double the men."

Riddle looked pleased with his response and wouldn't stop smiling as they got their ice cream cones. Riddle paid. Harry was over the moon to eat another ridiculously expensive cone without paying for it. He had disposable income but it didn't mean he wanted to spend it all. The Aurors arrived when Harry was happily halfway on his cone. He gave Riddle some of his ice cream to try because he was magnanimous like that. If vanilla had been good, strawberry was the bomb.

He enjoyed the sun while he could and left Riddle to talk to the Aurors. Harry had no doubts there were going to be countless meetings about this. If he had to guess, England gaining the support of two superpowers like Japan and Australia had made some people very nervous and they had decided that killing the visible face of the movement will stop it. Or something else. Either way, the paperwork will be a nightmare. Should he fill 147-A3 form for a foreign terrorist attack? Or the form 148-A7 magical attack by an unknown enemy?

Susan will eat the mangled remains of his body if he messed up the paperwork.

The meeting with the Italian ambassador and his team was already pushing the three-hour mark and Harry was just about to gauge his eyes out with his wand. They were trying to con Riddle out of reparations for the fight they had started and weasel out of a few trade agreements out of "concerns about England's safety and security". Harry had no doubt that the primary goal had been to kill Riddle but failing to do that, a lump sum of money and defaming England was second best.

Harry decided he had let this farce go on long enough. Clearly, no one

here had any motivation to go home. It's probably too late to work out, he forgot to take out the meat from the freezer, Claude was probably mangling his cables in hunger-fulled retribution, and worst of all, he had to continue to work on his thesis. He was going home to a rageful chicken, no dinner, and more work.

Harry internally screamed when a break was called. He checked his watch. If he got out of here in the next hour he could probably make it to the samosa place before it closed. Decision made, Harry acted.

He let his body relax, widened his eyes in innocent curiosity, and added a tad of magic to his face to enhance his features. He changed his posture in subtle but powerful ways that clearly read childish excitement and cluelessness. Harry had been to more than one honeypot mission. Riddle gave him a quick suspicious glance. *Trust me*, Harry thought as he walked toward the Italian minister.

"That's a very beautiful ring," Harry commented with a shy smile, "It's not every day you see a stone that shade of bright orange."

The man puffed up in arrogance, greed entering his eyes, "You wouldn't see it anywhere else. It's from my family's mine." He looked at Harry with hunger and at Riddle tauntingly.

So easy.

"Is that so? But surely it can be found in other places," Harry responded as he leaned forward in interest.

Arrogance was such an easy emotion to exploit.

"It can't, child. This particular stone has fairy dust inside only found in our territory that gives it this unique shine."

Harry hummed. "Now that I think about it, we found a ring with a similar stone at the scene of the crime. However, it must be a fake because as you said they can only be found in your family's mine. Either way, it should be just about done processing and we will know for sure. Do you want to follow us to the Auror department? You must be eager to hear the news about the fake ring firsthand."

The man turned bone white as he figured out the trap he had fallen into. The room was heavy with silence. Harry gathered his papers and stood up.

Harry smiled at the man, innocent as a lamb, "Well, come on now," Harry encouraged. "I'm sure counterfeits are a headache for your family."

They did not in fact want to go to the Auror department with Harry. And suddenly they did not want anything more than to leave in peace, ask for nothing, and put all of this behind them.

Funny how that happens.

Harry watched with unholy glee the chaos he had unleashed. The meeting quickly turned in Riddle's favor, the Italians capitulated to every demand to avoid outright war and it was wrapping up. Harry looked at the clock on the wall. Just in time.

"Great job, Potter. Let's go find that ring," Avery said when the meeting was over.

Harry blinked. "Ah, you see. About that. There's no ring."

"There's no ring?" Lestrangle asked, baffled.

"No. But I did see an orange gaudy ring on one of the attackers' fingers. It just...you know, stayed on their finger."

"But you clearly saw the stone and recognized it?"

Harry looked at the man blankly, not sure why that mattered. "It was orange," Harry explained. He hadn't looked up too much from his ice cream cone. But he had seen it in the periphery as he had been cataloging structural damage. It was difficult not to notice a fucking orange golf ball-sized ring. Was it the super special infused with fairy farts stone from the family mine? Who knows. Harry took an educated guess for the sake of efficiency.

Avery groaned. Lestrangle made a hissing sound as if he was dying. Bellatrix looked ready to tear his head off.

"We can continue this discussion tomorrow," Lucius said to calm the incoming fight.

Harry frowned. Tomorrow? Tomorrow is Saturday.

Harry stared at Riddle unblinking. *You make me come here on a Saturday I will raze this Ministry to the ground. I will leave nothing behind but ashes. I will tear it down wall by fucking wall. You think I wouldn't? Because I have nothing to lose-*

"No, need," Riddle intercepted. "We can continue Monday."

Harry smiled gently. *Of course, we can* . He bid them goodbye before he was roped into a post-meeting meeting. He was briefly filling in Martinez and Pike on his hectic day as they waited in line for the floo.

"Is this their first try?" Martinez asked. Harry stilled. Fuck, the guy in the closet. He had forgotten. They turned to look at Harry.

Harry laughed nervously, his eyes darted to the exits. "Well, you see" and when he in fact could not come up with something they could see he admitted, " ... No. Don't look at me like that," Harry whined. "It was close to six. It would have been a hassle to deal with them that day...so I trapped them...and forgot."

"It could happen to anyone. I've been busy," Harry defended at the dual unimpressed stares.

Martinez sighed and pinched the bridge of his nose. "Are they alive?"

"...I haven't checked?" It came out as a question.

"Where?"

"In a supply closet on the first floor."

"In a supply... you know what, no. Today I refuse. Just take me to them."

Harry ran out of the department before he was followed or stupefied. "Don't worry, I'll take care of it. Technically he never committed a crime," he screamed back.

Harry took down the wards, opened the door a centimeter, and peeked his head into it. A pair of furious eyes glared him back. "Oh good, you are alive."

"You."

Harry pulled the man from the closet and dusted him off as he laughed nervously. "Don't be too mad, it wasn't personal," Harry tried to explain. That made it worse somehow. Harry evaded the retaliatory curse as he walked the man towards the floor.

"Not personal?" The hitman hissed with deathly intention.

Harry waved away the death threat, "Look I'm not judging. Prostitutes, government slaves, the clergy, you; We all work for money and not because it's a passion. But the end of the workday is really not the best time for that kind of thing. My thesis advisor WILL castrate me if I don't deliver by the end of the month. And to be honest, you won't kill Riddle but I'll have to stay late to do the paperwork and deal with the countless meetings," Harry stopped walking and looked at the man seriously. "I will not deal with trial papers again. I will make you disappear before that happens, you got me?"

The hitman gave Harry a truly bewildered look.

Harry went back to smiling. "Finding work-life balance is hard enough, you know?" Harry tried to appeal to another overworked and

tired employee.

The hitman did not know. Pity.

"Anyway," Harry changed the subject. "You technically did nothing wrong so you are free to leave unless you want to press charges for unlawful detainment." Harry looked at the man hopefully. "To be honest, sitting in prison sounds better than working on my thesis right now."

The man kept glaring at Harry. "That's a no I reckon? Well, toodles! Keep safe out there," Harry said with a cheery wave as he pushed the man towards the floo with some powder. Even as he was flooing away the man kept direct eye contact with Harry.

"Well, that went well," Harry figured as he went back to the Auror department floo line.

"It's taken care of," Harry happily updated his friends.

"And by taken care of it you mean...?" Martinez asked with trepidation. Harry was hurt by the insinuation. He had only let the man in a broom closet for a week.

"Showed him to the floo of course. He agreed not to press charges," maybe. "And did not even look *that* mad."

Pike sighed, "You've always had more power than sense."

Chapter End Notes

<https://passion-lasagna.tumblr.com/post/675276019620577280/pike-from-a-great-tomarry-fanfiction-fic-too>  
By lilluz21

<https://ibb.co/p4GgCvC>  
By greiskelly

First sentence I heard it from Elyse Myers on Ig, tried to find the video again but couldn't. Just know it was inspired by her.



"Look Gregory, I just don't feel they are truly your friends," Harry said, his voice soft.

"Harry," Riddle called from behind.

"A moment," Harry responded without looking away from Goyle's brown eyes. He had Goyle's pudgy hand trapped between his own as he broke the hard truth. "They haven't asked once about your art exhibition and you've been working on that for how long? Months, right?"

Goyle's small eyes watered.

"Harry," Riddle growled sounding significantly closer.

"A fucking moment," Harry replied testily this time breaking eye contact with Goyle to send Riddle a warning glare. He turned back to Goyle with a soft look and squeezed his hand. "You deserve better."

Draco appeared out of nowhere like the jack in a box no one ever wants and slapped Harry's hand off. "Potter, stop poaching my friends," Draco sneered as he pulled Goyle away. Goyle looked at Riddle and sent Harry a nervous glance before following Draco.

"You are a shit friend," Harry bit back to Malfoy.

Riddle did not ask again, he grabbed Harry's shoulders and moved him away. Harry looked at his dinky watch. 8:58am. "I have two minutes until I'm the property of the Ministry of Magic." So fuck off.

Riddle's smile was condescending. "Don't be silly, Harry. You are always mine."

"Where's HR?" Harry demanded.

Riddle's smile widened. "We don't have HR."

"Ok. First, let's create an HR office. Then I'll anonymously report you for harassment."

Riddle's smile turned devilish. "How about dinner tonight to go over

sexual harassment in the workplace in detail?"

Harry threw his head back in laughter and a few people turned to stare at the loud noise. "That was smooth," Harry complimented with a smile, feeling reluctantly impressed.

Riddle dropped the seductive look and smiled happily, "It was, wasn't it?" He asked proudly. Harry gave him the win. This was the same man that not too long ago turned red with compliments.

Ok. So maybe they were a bit less like compliments and more like invites to have sex. But the point stood.

"You managed to get the ritual approved?" Riddle asked as they walked to the office.

Harry snorted. "I mean, it would be hard for them to deny it after you were in the audience and Asami Ito stood by my side vouching for the ritual." Harry was a thousand percent sure the judges did not hear half of what Harry said over their mixed emotions of awe and terror. Which was great because Harry was the first to admit he had no idea how that ritual was working.

Harry had dragged that motherfucker kicking and screaming to the finish line. It was a duck-tapped monstrosity that barfed seven other rituals and was all held together by Harry's hopes and dreams of graduating this year. It wasn't pretty but what mattered was that it was functional.

Kinda.

Contrary to what Riddle might think, he wasn't a genius. Just a guy who is very good at pattern recognition and learned the basics over the years on the job. The nitty-gritty of why pentagon shapes worked better than circles or why thick lines made everything collapse? Well, he had no idea. They just do and Harry is happy with that level of knowledge and felt no urgent need to discover the whys.

"Yes. They really had no choice," Riddle agreed with a charming smile.

Harry side-eyed him and kept walking.

None of his dammed buisness.

"At least I got my advisor off my back." For now. Harry looked at his watch, 9:00am. "Should we start with your nine o'clock emergency

meeting?" Harry asked as he sat in front of Riddle's desk with his agenda. At the prolonged silence, Harry looked up from his papers.

Riddle did not look up from the note he was writing. "Change of plans. That meeting was canceled."

Harry paused. Riddle did not elaborate.

"Oh? And when is it rescheduled for?" Harry asked trying to give Riddle the benefit of the doubt.

"...It's permanently canceled."

Harry closed his agenda slowly. Riddle's quill stopped mid-word and he carefully looked up.

Harry got up. He closed the office door softly and breathed deeply.

"You are not killing them," Harry ordered firmly as he felt the heat of his incoming fury touching his feet and rising to his neck. "Riddle, are you hearing me?" Harry whispered as he approached the desk. "You are NOT killing them. I already talked with the attorneys and we have a meeting with Public Relations at three."

Riddle looked at Harry.

Harry looked at Riddle.

"They are all dead, aren't they?" Harry finally asked in resignation. It was too early for a tension headache.

"They are...", Riddle hesitated before continuing slowly, "incapable of making it to this meeting today."

Harry gave Riddle his most unimpressed stare. And to be clear, it was very unimpressed.

Riddle looked to the side and cleared his throat, "...or ever."

"Riddle!," Harry snapped, annoyed. "It took me most of yesterday to organize everything. You fucking saw me slaving away at the floor all day and it did not cross your mind to warn me? A simple *'by the way, Harry, take the fucking day off and stop wasting your day doing useless stuff'* would have been fine."

He wasn't paid enough for this. He just wasn't. When he wanted Umbridge killed (to avoid paperwork) Riddle acted all high and

mighty. And now this? (killing after the paperwork) Where's the equality? Where's the fairness? Harry pressed down the quill to the parchment and dragged the point with enough force to pierce the paper as he crossed the names out of the day's list.

"Why I'm I working for a Dark Lord?" Harry asked himself, the universe and anyone that might be listening. (Answer: Because working in corporate was basically the same but paid worse.)

"Because you had no choice?" Riddle ventured.

It was Harry's turn to look at Riddle blankly.

"Because you wanted the raise? ... and the apartment?" Riddle tried again.

"It is a very nice apartment," Harry agreed mildly. "It could use a second room," he added as he stared unblinkingly at Riddle.

Riddle smirked. "You don't sound too upset."

"I'm devastated," Harry replied in a monotone as he thought of all the things he could've done yesterday.

Riddle looked victorious. "But not at the killings."

"Every life is precious," Harry replied dully.

Harry stared blank-faced at Riddle until Riddle dropped his smile.

"You are not going to drop the room thing are you?"

Harry blinked. "I want it painted green."

"At this pace, it will be cheaper to buy the building," Riddle grouched. Harry did not care that the owner was overcharging Riddle for structural changes ten times the price of market value. It wasn't his problem.

"Are you actually upset I killed them?" Riddle checked.

"I am very upset you killed them," Harry repeated as he opened the agenda again. Riddle looked at the agenda and then at Harry.

"...is it because I messed with the agenda?"

Harry turned furious eyes at Riddle. "You know better than to fuck

with my agenda."

"You sound very relaxed about all this. I was worried."

"I'm the furthest thing from relaxed."

"I did not expect you to be so understanding," Riddle remarked. "I had the shackles ready if you wanted to run."

Harry scoffed. "You couldn't hold me if you wanted."

Riddle smiled, fondly, his eyes creasing. "I know."

Well.

If that wasn't terrifying.

Harry looked around the room to see if he could spot any spell he might have missed. Then looked down at himself to see if he hadn't noticed any magical equivalent of shackles, ropes, or chains. All clean...for now.

"How would you know?" Harry asked with narrowed eyes. Riddle smiled and did not respond. Harry dropped it. It was better not to know.

"So, why aren't you scared and running out the door?" Riddle checked.

Harry sighed. "You know Vico?"

Riddle stared blankly.

"Vico Tert?" Harry tried again with increasing aggravation. "The guy with the mustache that you killed last night after seeing me work all day in coordinating the fallout of his fuck up?"

The rudeness.

A fucking sociopath.

Not an ounce of compassion.

At last, a spark of recognition in Riddle's eyes. Finally. "Martinez has

an open case against the wife in connection to the missing kids and a pedophile ring. They are probably both in it but he's better at keeping his mouth shut so we- I mean- *the Aurors* haven't gotten any evidence on him yet. I'll text Molly to mobilize her team to search all of his houses before the wife and the rest of the ring have time to clean up the evidence. You inconvenienced many people but, in the end, it doesn't matter. He's not *necessarily* needed alive."

"Ah," Riddle smiled softly. "Could you be any more sweet and vicious?"

He was saved from responding to that absurd statement by the door opening and Snape entering. He was early for his appointment so Snape probably knew the change of plans. *Before Harry.*

He looked back at Riddle when he was sure it was only Snape, "You are still adding a second room."

Riddle's face turned sour. "Why?"

Harry glared. "Because I'm upset."

Riddle looked at the ceiling, looked down, and pinched the bridge of his nose. "Didn't we just go over how not important it was to have him alive?"

Harry stared, eyes blank.

Riddle tsked. "*Fine.*"

Harry finally smiled, appeased. "Charming. I expect it done no later than next week."

Riddle huffed and stood. "I have to welcome a friend. I'll be back in a moment."

"And Riddle?" Harry called back when the man was almost at the door, *Fuck with my agenda again and I'll make you regret it*, he thought with a sweet smile, not wanting Snape snooping in the conversation.

Riddle's mouth curved up. *Do you promise?*

*You are flirty today. Be careful, I might get pregnant.*

Riddle widened his eyes and threw his head back laughing. Snape, in possession of more than one brain cell, looked between them with narrowed eyes. The door closed behind Riddle leaving Harry finally

alone with Snape

"You are shameless", Snape spat. And here Harry thought they could ignore each other like adults. "Prostituting yourself like a common whore for a bit of money and fame. You are just like your useless mother."

In a show of great personal growth, maturity, and progress on his health journey, Harry did not punch, curse, or kill Snape. Harry slowly turned his body towards Snape. "That generational trauma flaring up today, huh?" Harry asked mildly, face disinterested.

Snape's nostrils flared.

"I can give you my 12 o'clock appointment so you can talk to the therapist about how your father called your mother a useless whore and how it made you feel," Harry continued in the same mild tone.

Snape's forehead vein made an appearance and he stalked forward. "You dare!"

Harry looked at the man evenly. "I've been wondering about the safety issues in your lab. You've been getting a lot of complaints lately. Maybe it's time for an inspection."

"You don't have the authority to do that," Snape spat as his pasty skin turned an angry red.

Harry smiled sweetly, "I don't. But luckily I know who does."

"Just like your father," Snape spat.

"Right back at ya pal," Harry responded, already tired of the conversation and the man. Why was it again that he had admired the man? Harry found it hard to remember now that the man was alive.

Snape stalked off and slammed the door shut. Harry hoped that meeting with Snape wasn't important because it sure as hell wasn't happening now.

*Liking the show?* Harry thought at the empty space near the door.

*Always,* Riddle responded.

*I'm opening an investigation into the safety of Snape's labs.*

*I won't pay you overtime so you'll have to do it on your own time.*

Harry glared at Riddle's general direction. *You never pay me overtime.*

*We can work something out if you are interested?*

Harry rolled his eyes. The chances of Riddle having sex with him before Harry promised his hand in marriage were next to zero. *Go away you creep. When we open that Human Resources office this is the first thing I'll report. Boss stalks employees using cheap Invisibility spells.* Riddle's laugh could be heard in the hallway.

Harry smiled as he closed the door. Just as he was getting comfortable on the sofa, Riddle came back with a very familiar face. Too familiar.

His eyes widened and he abruptly stood up. "Oh shit."

The man also stopped at the door mid-step and stared at Harry intently, "And who might this be Riddle?"

"Harry Potter, my assistant." Harry turned wild eyes to Riddle. Why would Riddle tell him his full name?

"Harry, this is Rupert Hensville, he's been my friend for over twenty years."

Harry froze.

Ok, Harry was the first to admit that mistakes had been made.

"It's before ten in the morning, is this early enough for your convenience?" The hitman Harry had trapped in the closet for a full week asked softly.

Harry laughed nervously as he looked at the exits, "Well, yes. Yes, it is. Thank you for your consideration," Harry answered politely because yes, ten is a good hour to be killed. At least he hadn't worked the entire day and then been killed. That would have just been sad.

Riddle frowned as he looked back and forward at the exchange, "How do you know each other?"

They answered at the same time.

The hitman was happy to recount the story, "Funny story." His face did not anticipate anything humorous about the story.

Harry laughed nervously and cut him off, "We don't. Not really. We passed each other by the hallway one time."



"Two weeks ago," the man continued over Harry, "I was going to warn you about an ambush at Diagon Alley," he looked at Harry intently, "but I got derailed. Your... assistant, is it? ...trapped me in a closet for a week."

Harry turned nervous eyes at Riddle. "I feared for your safety, sir. He is a known hitman."

"Where have you heard that ridiculous thing?" The man asked with shark-like eyes. Oops. Probably not common knowledge.

"And he wasn't scheduled," Harry defended to Riddle.

"You said it was because you didn't want to stay late doing paperwork," the man responded.

Harry did not remember saying that but couldn't deny it sounded suspiciously like something he would mutter at the end of a long day as he trapped a man in a closet.

Riddle looked from the man to Harry. "That I believe."

"...Two things can be true," Harry defended. "He was a dangerous, unplanned, unannounced guest and would have kept me longer at work. How was I to know you were friends?"

"Is that all you are going to say?" the man whispered as he slowly walked towards Harry.

Riddle stopped Hensville with a hand to his chest and turned to Harry in disappointment. "Harry you can't trap people in closets without informing me," he reproached, his eyes shining with amusement.

Big talk from the person that admitted to killing someone not too long ago without informing Harry.

Riddle ignored Harry's very reasonable indignation at the hypocrisy and turned to the man. "And Bert really, if you can be trapped in the closet by untrained assistants I am overestimating your value to me."

"That's not an untrained assistant. It was an impenetrable ward," the man hissed as he stared daggers at Harry.

Riddle raised a brow, "Was it an impenetrable ward, Harry?"

"Did you try Alohomora?" Harry asked the man instead.

Riddle looked at the man questioning. "I tried everything," Rupert hissed.

"But did you try Alohomora?" Harry insisted.

The man turned red, "I tried spells ten times stronger and nothing worked."

"But you didn't try Alohomora," Harry said as he shook his head in sad disappointment.

It wouldn't have worked of course but Harry enjoyed knowing this will haunt Hensville for the rest of his life.

"Pity," Riddle lamented. "An impenetrable ward would have been impressive. Look, Rupert, don't overreact. It can hardly be called keeping you prisoner if a first-year spell could have gotten you out."

"If it means anything," Harry added, "I meant to have you out sooner but forgot."

A blood vessel in Hensville left eye was dangerously approaching popping point, "No, it somehow doesn't make me feel better."

A lightbulb turned in Riddle's brain. "Was that the take care of the closet note you wrote on the calendar?"

"You deleted it, didn't you?" Harry said in familiar exasperation. He knew he had put a reminder. "There's a reason I don't let you touch the calendar."

Hensville interrupted before they could rehash this morning's fight, "What do you know about that assistant of yours?" Bert asked as if Harry wasn't there, still listening to the conversation. Rude.

"Harry?" Riddle asked confused. "He's harmless."

Both men turned to him and Harry smiled. There, harmless. A wee little rabbit.

Bert looked at Harry suspiciously. "Really? Harmless?"

Harry raised his hands in a show of innocence. "Pinky promise. I'm a regular nine-to-five government employee."

The man turned towards Riddle, "Riddle, he has to be an undercover foreign agent."

"Don't be silly," Riddle dismissed without a second thought, "Harry has only been out of the country a handful of times."

"Only a few vacations; nothing of significance," Harry vouched as if he had any idea of what has happened to this body before he got here.

"Why did you go to Diagon Alley the day of the attack? It was a work day and you never leave the office before seven."

Ah. That was problematic.

"Harry wanted ice cream."

Well, that Harry couldn't deny looked suspicious. But, "It was really good ice cream," Harry defended.

"He delivered you in a silver platter," Hensville accused.

"Harry is too lazy to actively try to kill me," Riddle dismissed without a second thought.

Harry looked at Riddle with shocked eyes. "What! I'm not lazy."

Riddle kept going. "That would mean having aspirations of greatness and believe me, he has none. He might let me die if I come between him and food... or time off... or his friends," Riddle broke off his contemplation and turned towards his friend. "But that's a passive act. I otherwise trust Harry."

"He's joking," Harry immediately clarified to the very angry hitman that seriously suspected him to be a foreign agent. Riddle smiled and did not agree it was a joke. Harry was going to kill him. "Anyway, I only have two friends. The odds are in his favor of a long life."

"The lunch lady," Riddle began listing.

"Which one?" Harry interrupted.

Riddle twitched. "There's more than one?"

Harry eyed him. "Of course."

"The one that makes the chicken?" Riddle guessed.

"Nicole. She's a doll. Sneaks in extra treacle tarts on Tuesdays." Harry did not have to think of it for a second. "Yeah, I would kill for her. Then three but that's it."

"There's Greta from first floor"

"You won't find a nicer lady," Harry defended. "She deserves the world."

"Gilbert," Riddle grumbled.

"Thinks I'm dapper. I'll die defending him."

"Today was the first time I heard his name is Gregory. Doesn't suit him."

"The sweetest baby," Harry cooed as he looked longingly to the door.

Riddle sighed, annoyed but not surprised. "Malfoy."

Harry opened his mouth to deny it but then stopped. "Which one?"

"Junior," Riddle clarified.

"Adorable. Have you seen how red he gets when mad?"

Riddle glared, "He's lucky I can read your mind."

"Why?"

"Because I know you see him as a child."

"As a child? No, but maybe a bratty younger brother to annoy."

"Susan and her husband."

"Hands down the best power couple in the Ministry," Harry gushed.

"The world is theirs and we just live in it."

"The fucking obsession," Riddle muttered under his breath. "The chicken."

"I will commit war crimes for that chicken," Harry swore.

"It's not even real," Riddle complained petulantly.

"Don't you fucking dare," Harry warned.

"Margaret," Riddle continued his list.

"She's our source of entertainment. Did you know she found that John's ex-wife is veela and now wants nothing to do with him?"

Riddle stopped his list and looked interested. "She didn't know? You told me everyone knew."

"Apparently no one filled her in."

"Fine. Margaret and whoever she's dating is understandable. The rest should go."

Harry turned to Hensville. "I'm a very normal employee, I assure you. I only want to kill my employer when he does stupid shit or makes me work overtime without pay."

"Harry is very honest when he says he wants to kill me," Riddle agreed, "and it's never because he believes I have power. In fact, he doesn't even acknowledge I have more power than my Senior Executive Secretary."

"Because you don't, you are alive and in power because Susan wants you to be and that is a fact and not an opinion."

"See?" Riddle said, as if he had made a point.

"Riddle, I'm not sure what he has told you, but he is a very dangerous man."

"You clearly haven't met many government employees," Harry said as he took treacle tart out of his pocket and broke the sealing enchantment. "Who you least expect will shank you for a raise and cry at your funeral."

"Didn't you tell me we had a poisoning last week?" Riddle asked as he held out his hand for some of the treacle tart.

Harry slapped his hand without taking his eyes off the hitman, "Yeah, the breakroom fridge stealer was found. Sadly, he went to another fridge. May his soul forever rest in the deepest pit of hell where the rest of the fridge stealers are."

"I'm finding that office work is surprisingly violent," Riddle joyfully informed Rupert. "I've recruited three secretaries and a janitor in the last month," He turned to Harry, "Was the culprit ever found?"

"My money is on Granny Minnie," Harry immediately responded. He already had money in the bet.

"Really? I thought it might have been Susan. Wasn't her casserole the

last thing that was stolen?"

Harry opened his mouth in shock, "Fuck, it could have been. Did she have an alibi?"

Riddle laughed. "Everyone that day had an alibi."

"Fuck, I lost my money. Susan loves her casserole, it has won prizes apparently, and Granny Minnie would have never left a body."

Hensville looked from Harry to Riddle in horror, "What has happened to you?" He asked Riddle.

Riddle blinked. "What? I can enjoy a bit of office gossip."

"You burned towns to the ground," Hensville responded aghast.

Riddle looked at Harry with wide eyes, "They were empty towns."

"Mjum, *sure they were...*," Harry drawled, "just for fun, why would you burn an empty town exactly?"

Riddle faltered. "Decontamination?"

Harry slowly chewed. "Are you asking or saying?"

"Anyway, Rupert, please get to the point of your visit," Riddle testily ordered.

The man threw a spell at Harry. Harry kept chewing. Riddle's shield turned bright blue before dissipating.

"He did not flinch. That's not normal."

Harry swallowed. "It was obviously not going to land."

"Riddle, I've been in this profession for twenty years, and from my experience, the kind of man that stands and watches unworried about his safety is the kind of man that has no need to fear for his safety."

Riddle dismissed it. "Harry has a documented past of being careless with his personal safety." Riddle turned sharp eyes at him, "He is working on it with a therapist, aren't you?"

There was an *or else* somewhere in that sentence, Harry was sure. He threw his hands up in the universal sign of peace. And ruined it by taking a bite of his tart since it was close to his mouth.

"I don't have to be worried about my safety. Riddle is right there and he still doesn't want me dead so I won't die."

"You trust me with your safety?" Riddle asked, touched.

"I trust your *obsession* with my relative safety." Relative doing a lot of work in that sentence.

"That's sweet."

Harry narrowed his eyes. "Is it though? *Is it really?*" Harry asked disbelieving. "If you thought you could get away with it you'd create an aquarium for me in your home."

Riddle looked at Harry considerately, "I could make it big?" Riddle offered. "It wouldn't even feel like an aquarium. And you wouldn't have to work," Riddle tempted with a faraway look that spoke of quickly forming plans.

"Sure," Harry agreed easily, "No bills to pay, feed me periodically and I'll grow fat and lazy and masturbate all the time. You'll throw in tv, books, internet, and the occasional hooker, won't you? I'll worry about nothing, do nothing, and never walk farther than from the couch to the fridge or toilet. Fuck my masters, fuck work, no offense, fuck the entire world," Harry ended animatedly with fire in his eyes as he clearly envisioned this future.

Riddle looked at Harry as if Harry had broken every single one of his dreams and killed his dog. Harry smiled back happily. "...Never mind. That's a bad idea. You'll work for all eternity and after that masters I expect a doctorate."

"Harsh but not surprising, my capitalist overlord."

Riddle still looked put out. "You do sure love breaking an old man's heart."

"I'm not sure what you mean, you creepy old man," Harry denied with a sweet smile. "I love making you happy. Coffee?" Harry offered, knowing perfectly well that Riddle did not like it.

Riddle sighed, "Tea, please. Also one for Bert."

Harry looked at Bert, having forgotten he was there four minutes ago. Bert had not forgotten about him and looked curiously from him to Riddle.

"And Harry?" Riddle called him back, "Try to avoid poisoning it."

"You'd wish I'd waste poison on you," Harry quipped back from the door.

"Well, it would at least show some emotion," Riddle muttered before turning to Hensvile, "Bert don't be difficult with Harry, I already have to build him a second room, and if you keep throwing spells any extra charge is going out of your pay."

"Don't bother. I'm still asking for better health insurance for an unsafe work environment. And not whatever crap insurance Moody has. I want to have fully reconstructed limbs."

Riddle frowned in displeasure, "I protected you. You even said you felt no sense of danger because you know I wouldn't let you die."

Harry blinked. "I did not say that." Harry heard Riddle's peeved voice all the way out in the hallway.

"You two are disgusting. Please escort me back to my closet. I'm not even mad anymore."

"Would Alohomora have opened the closet?"

"Hell no."



"Hello, dear boss."

Riddle's eyes minutely moved to see if there were any exits. There weren't. Harry slowly closed the door.

"This meeting wasn't scheduled."

"Treacle tart?" Riddle said taking it out of his pocket. Harry's eyes wavered, but he stood firm. "Signed snitch from the grand finals?" Riddle tried again.

Yeah, fuck it. Harry grabbed it from Riddle's hand and inspected it. He looked back at Riddle suspiciously. "How many pockets do you have exactly?"

Riddle looked grim, "many."

It was a meeting with lower-level Death Eaters and it was going disaster-level wrong. Riddle was murderous and the people responsible were making it worse by making excuses and blaming others. Harry did not know the details nor was it his problem. He was there because it was work hours and Riddle had bribed him.

Riddle's mouth was pressed tightly in a curved smile, his fingers twitching on air, and he was looking at the man in front of him without blinking. While it was nice that Riddle was focusing that killing intent on someone else for a change it did not mean Harry wanted to be part of it.

He sighed. A normal Tuesday on this bloodbath of a job.

This was ridiculous. He was somehow seeing more action as an assistant than when he was an Auror.

"I'll find refreshments," Harry excused himself. For the first time since this meeting started, Riddle's eyes turn to Harry with a questioning tilt of his head.

*I'm a gentle soul*, Harry explained through the link. *This is upsetting. I'm upset.*

Riddle nodded and Harry turned and headed to the door.

What Harry did not know was that he had become the litmus test for Riddle's followers. If Harry was present, Riddle's followers walked out the door bruised but alive. But if Harry wasn't present...well.

Before Harry reached the door, he felt a hand roughly grab his neck, turn him back, and the point of a wand at his temple.

*What have you done?* Harry thought in resignation. *You signed your death certificate. This only has one outcome.*

The man did not even get to open his mouth to make his demands before a warm, red shower covered Harry head to toe. Thick, warm blood fell from his hair down his cheeks. Harry stood in shock watching as the fat droplets saturated the carpet. Riddle hit a large artery with his severing spell and it was like a sprinkler of blood going off.

Half the man's head splat on the floor with a diagonal cut that showed the bones, muscles, and tissue as if it were an anatomy exhibition for medical students. The rest of his body stood for a second before joining the severed head on the floor. Everyone else ran.

Harry looked at his blood-covered hands and sleeves and then at Riddle in horror. Why a severing curse? What happened to the clean Kadabra? Harry looked down in horror at his brand new expensive sweater that was now covered in fresh blood. It was his favorite. He'll have to buy more clothes.

"Oh no," Harry said in misery. Then his eyes continue down to his soaked pants and ruined shoes. "Why?" Harry asked Riddle in despair.

Riddle looked at Harry in panic. "I'm sorry Harry I did not think about you seeing this. He pointed his wand at you and I reacted. I'm not this kind of person, I promise," Riddle kept babbling and Harry tuned it out as he despaired. Riddle carefully cradled Harry's face so that Harry could only look forward and not at the body on the floor.

"You are paying for professional cleaning. And what do you mean you're not that kind of person?" Harry snapped. "You are exactly the kind of bastard that has no conscience of the collateral damage he creates. This was brand new!"

"Sorry, habit. I know I'm this kind of person but if you listen to why I did it..." Riddle blinked. "Wait, what?"

Harry was furious. He hadn't wanted to come to this stupid meeting that he contributed exactly nothing and now his work clothes were ruined, a body was cooling on the floor, and this will be his mess to clean up. "There are ten thousand ways to kill without spilling blood.

But did you care to do any of them? NO! Because you only think about yourself."

Riddle paused. Opened his mouth and closed it before hesistantly saying, "You are mad...about the blood?"

"Of course, I'm bloody mad about the damn blood, Harry snapped. "This is magical blood. It will ruin everything. *And* it's starting to burn."

Riddle started to quickly take off his sweater while Harry helped and complained, "It's not even eleven in the goddamned morning and I'm covered in blood and have to be six more hours without a proper shower. Really, Riddle, sometimes I wonder about you."

Riddle looked at Harry strangely as he held Harry's blood-soaked sweater, he looked down at the severed head cooling on the floor and then back at Harry, "Sometimes I wonder about you too..." Riddle said with a strange expression. "You might be in shock. People in shock talk nonsense."

His shirt had been largely spared, but his pants and shoes had not. "You know what would help a Harry Potter in shock?" Harry asked bitingly.

It flew over Riddle's head. "What?" He asked worried.

"A shower and new clothes. And you are cleaning my clothes of all the blood. I mean it, Riddle. The blood is coming off even if it means performing a ritual sacrifice."

Since this was inside Riddle's office and inside the Ministry, the entire protocol had to be activated. Aurors were called, an investigation was started, and statements were taken. The blood was drying and it was itching and burning. Harry was miserable.

"Can you act like a civilian for a goddamn second?" Martinez whispered angrily, "Jesus, act scared once in a while. Or, I don't know, don't complain about laundry while there's a corpse in front of you. That insensitivity to violence and death is only acceptable in a few jobs. Unless you want to work in a funeral home, shape up. Act like a civilian, and be properly traumatized."

"I am upset," Harry responded unhappily.

"Upset is not traumatized. Upset is having coffee spilled on you."

"People are already talking. If you don't shed a tear in your interview and convince them you are not a sociopath, I'm going to make sure you can't stand for a month," Martinez looked at him closely and enunciated each word. "Do you understand me?"

This wasn't his friend talking, this was his Head Auror, "Yes sir."

Harry, very maturely, walked away to be alone and wash the blood from his face and arms. He angrily rubbed soap in his eyes to irritate them so that it looked like he cried in the bathroom.

Lavender looked at the time on her phone and cackled. "Pay up, Potter, you owe me."

Harry sighed as he saw Riddle at the entrance of the trendy bar

Lavender had chosen. This again. At least Lucy did not look happy about it. Harry had wanted one night to himself. One night. Was that too much to ask?

The bar was uncomfortably full. It meant that they had a good ten minutes before Riddle and Lucy got to them. At almost every step someone stopped the pair to talk to either one. Harry grumbled but passed the galleon. Less than an hour. Harry had been hoping that Lucy might distract Riddle longer. *Disappointed in you, Lucy.*

"Harry," Lavender called, breaking Harry from unfairly blaming Lucy for Riddle's codependency issues.

Harry turned to her. "Hmn?"

She looked at the entrance and looked back at Harry, "I know you said that Riddle was interested in you because you saved him from being possessed. And Riddle is... Riddle. Everyone knows that. But isn't it a bit too much, even for him?" Lavender wondered as they watched Riddle and Lucy at the other side of the bar making their way to them.

The bar had cheap drinks, good music, overflowing plants, and soft lighting that gave hippy, non-traditional vibes while still being extremely curated. Lavender loved it. It was a random Tuesday but Harry had tomorrow off from work because he was doing practical exams for his degree so it counted as Friday-ish. (There was no way he could muster the bravery to face his thesis advisor in person and all of her questions, -good questions, valid questions, questions Harry should have an answer for, or an idea of an answer-, without a drink.)

Harry turned to Lavender as he leaned against the bar counter, beer on hand, "Everything about Riddle is too much," he stated matter of factly.

Lavender struggled to get the words out but finally said, "I sometimes feel like he's competing with me for you," she paused, "isn't that crazy?" She laughed, a bit forceful.

Harry blinked. At one point a younger, more immature Harry had been intimidated by her perceptiveness. Now, his smile widened, "He, one hundred percent, is," Harry confirmed.

Lavender sagged in relief, "Oh good, so it's not just me imagining things. You see it too?"

Harry frowned, fixing her shoulder strap and wondering what the real conversation was, "Is he making you uncomfortable?" Harry asked seriously.

"To be honest, he terrifies me," Lavender said with a smile as she closed the distance between them. She whispered in his ear, "But is it horrible that I enjoy it a bit? I can't help but let my hand linger and see how he silently suffers," she said as she put her hands in the nape of his neck and toyed with his hair.

"What did Riddle do to piss you off?" Harry asked with a smile, only half seriously.

She smiled wickedly, "Nothing. I just enjoy the ego boost. The most powerful man wants what I can easily have."

"So I'm easy, eh?" Harry teased, his arms going to her hips.

"So, so easy," she agreed.

Harry snorted and did not disagree. "I can't blame him for his good taste. I'm wonderful."

"Ooooh, someone is cocky," Lavender playfully ribbed.

Harry raised an eyebrow in mock challenge, "You are not afraid of a bit of competition, are you?" They had this conversation already so Harry was mostly joking with her but also just in case. It's one thing the theory of being open and casual and just fun than the reality.

Lavender pretended to think about it. "Not at all."

"Ouch," Harry put a hand to his chest and stumbled back. "Now who's cocky?"

Lavender was silent for a moment, her eyes going from Harry's eyes to his lips. She closed the distance between them until their noses were touching. She smiled at him, "You have no idea how you look at me, do you?" She whispered.

Harry kept his eyes on her lips, "How do I look at you?" He whispered back.

She smiled and did not answer, kissing his lips before stepping back. "I'm not worried."

Harry frowned, not knowing why that bothered him, but held her before she moved too far. "I'm glad you are enjoying it but tell me if you are ever uncomfortable," he told her seriously. Riddle barely



tolerated Lavender at work. But since Riddle barely tolerated anyone on any particular day it wasn't noticeable.

Lavender smiled and touched their foreheads together, "Thanks, Harry." She grabbed her beer and took a long sip getting foam on her lips.

Harry couldn't help it, he pulled her by the neck and kissed the beer froth off her lips before she could lick it away. Lavender laughed brightly, bringing the attention of nearby couples to them.

"What did Riddle do to piss you off?" She threw his words back.

"I don't need an excuse to kiss you."

"You are usually more careful about PDA in front of him." In front of the crazy, obsessive, jealous man with a history of killing his opponents. Yes, Harry was usually careful, if only for Lavender's sake.

Harry looked at Riddle making his way to them and frowned. He was tired of being careful. He will kill Riddle if he touches Lavender, Harry hopes the man knows that. "Fuck him, I had very specific plans for tonight."

She giggled and gave him a quick peck before slotting herself against him and facing the entrance.

Their time alone was over.

Harry turned towards Riddle, "Fancy meeting you guys here."

Lucy's smile was brittle and Riddle was frowning. Neither was happy. Good. Harry wasn't happy either.

"You are not working tomorrow," Riddle said, as if it excused crashing his date, and turned his glare to Lavender. Harry put a protective arm around Lavender and sent a warning glare. Riddle's expression melted into one of passive content. It was meant to be disturbing.

Lavender shivered. Harry pulled Lavender to the dance floor. It was one of the few places Riddle would not follow and proceeded to ignore the man for half the night.

"You are dating Ms. Brown. You said you weren't dating." It was carefully not an accusation.

Harry's hand stopped mid-air holding a folder before slowly putting it down and sighed. Riddle held off the conversation for longer than Harry would have suspected. "I'm not," Harry responded as he started reading another request.

Riddle scoffed. "Then what do you call all the dates you've been?"

Harry sighed again and put the quill down. It seemed they were taking a break from work. Harry turned back to confirm that the office door was closed. It was; as it often is with Harry in the office. "We are casual," Harry explained carefully, hopefully for the last time.

Riddle's face went from angry to annoyed before settling on

grudgingly interested, "What do you mean when you say casual? What is casual to you?"

Why did he have to explain this? It seemed he couldn't do anything with Lavender without Riddle studying it like an equation and then quizzing Harry about it. Annoying.

"Casual is casual, Riddle," Harry dismissed, turning to a new page and hoping it was enough to kill the conversation.

Riddle's hand covered the paper. "Humour me."

No way out of this conversation then. Harry put his forehead on the desk so he wouldn't have to see Riddle while he answered, "Just sex, I guess? No commitment. Like friends with benefits?" Why he was saying everything as a question. Harry started gently hitting his head against the desk. "Can we not talk about this?" Harry begged. The hard wood of the desk turned into a soft pillow. Harry scowled at Riddle.

"No, no, no. We are talking about this. I want to know exactly your definition of a date and what makes it a date."

"Intention, I guess. It's not... courtship. It's ...pre-sex? Setting the mood?" Why was this so hard to explain?

Riddle hummed, his eyes too intense for Harry to fool himself this was a casual conversation and not an interrogation. "It's Lavender aware of your intentions? Or your lack of intentions?"

Harry sat up quickly in annoyance. "Yes, of course. We talked about it before starting. Neither of us is interested in something serious right

now. Just something casual."

"Then, why the dates?"

Harry groaned in misery. "Riddle...you know sex doesn't start at the bed, right?" Please say right. Please say right.

Riddle frowned.

Oh no.

"What do you mean?" He asked, confirming Harry's worst fears.

"Ok. So. Look," Harry started to explain, "if you wait until you are in bed to start sex you are already too late. That makes sense right?"

Empty blink.

Oh no.

Right. Ok. Harry could do this. Someone had to take one for the team. Even if Harry wasn't going to benefit from the results, someone had to do it.

"Foreplay, Riddle. Seduction. Getting in the right state of mind. Setting the stage, you know?"

Riddle cocked his head like an attentive wolf, listening but still not following. "I did not peg you for an exhibitionist."

"What? No. Look. Listen. It's not about doing sex acts in public. Just imagine you are tired, hungry, in a bad mood, and it's the middle of the work day and I just start taking your clothes off. You would rightfully kick me and tell me to fuck off, right?" Harry looked at Riddle expectantly.

Riddle blinked and after a drawn-out moment finally responded, "...right."

"...Ok, I'm going to ignore that long pause," Harry said with an amused smile that Riddle returned. God, he wanted to have sex with this man.

Harry's lips twitched as he decided to be a bit evil. They can *both* suffer through this conversation. "The point is, anyone can have sex. Even good sex. Fine sex. But mindblowing sex, Riddle, takes work." Riddle's eyes darkened and he zeroed in on Harry.

Harry lowered his voice, forcing Riddle to lean forward, "The difference is the anticipation. The suspension. The buildup until it bubbles and explodes. It's feeling drugged and drunk on nothing but want until keeping your hands off is simply unbearable. A crime of nature. It's knowing what makes them shiver and gasp."

Harry leaned forward, bringing their faces closer and Riddle's muscles tensed. "Telling them in detail what is going to happen hours beforehand so that they spend their day thinking about it. It's having them trembling, sweating, pupils blown, and halfway to orgasm on just your words. That, Riddle, is setting the stage." Harry leaned back and his mischievous smile slowly widened at seeing the effect his words had on Riddle. He turned from Riddle's dark gaze to the papers

in front of him, picked up the quill, and kept working.

Riddle coughed to cover his silence and looked at the ceiling. "Prolonged mental torture. Yes," Riddle nodded decidedly, "that sounds about right for you."

Harry laughed, bright and happy. Riddle shook his head in disbelief with a small smile, still staring at the ceiling.

"And then *the after* and that's as important." Might as well be thorough. The purpose of this conversation was not only to torture, fun as that may be.

Riddle frowned at the ceiling, "After?"

"Bringing them down from that high gently. Making them feel cared for and valued. No matter how good you are in bed, the whole experience turns sour if you make your partner feel like a cheap, warm hole after." This counts as doing community service, Harry was sure, with the amount of people Riddle brought to his bed.

Riddle finally lowered his gaze from the ceiling to Harry, "Would you have done all of that with me?"

Harry blinked, startled, "Of course. If you had been open to it. Not everyone needs or wants the same amount of attention. And that's ok also."

"So you do all of that with her?"

Harry nodded slowly, unsurely.

"I don't like it".

Harry did not need to read Riddle's thoughts to know that. Harry rolled his eyes, "Shocker." And proceeded to actually begin to work. "Get to it. We are leaving at 4:30pm and I don't want to hear any excuses."

"We are not."

Harry hummed.

Just to spite Riddle, Harry left at four. Riddle followed right behind and Harry had expected nothing else. They entered the large auditorium, event already half way and not a chair left.

"He knows you are here," Riddle whispered after Pike's eyes had quickly glanced at their hiding spot at the back of the room.

Harry scoffed, "Of course, he knows I'm here. Where else would I be?" Harry asked distractedly as he watched his best friend compete for this year's Best Potion Master. Harry had no doubt Pike will win against opponents three times his apparent age. "Now shush. I want to hear the sound of Snape's heart breaking when they announce the winners"

"... so it was dead of night and we broke into the ice skate park by Willow Street," Lavender was telling Lucy. They were celebrating Pike's second consecutive win at a corner bar. A place way too casual

for the king and queen of the country to be. People at the bar invariably did a confused double-take when they noticed them.

Pike was at the counter, sitting on the stools talking to a woman who was not Padma, to Lavender's resigned discontent. Martinez and Liliana sat at another table. Alone and away from the music with wine. Their heads close. Harry, as usual, was in his inescapable foursome. Now so common that conversation flowed naturally and everyone was relaxed. Riddle had finally worn them all down to accept this as the new normal.

"When was this?" Lucy asked. Like this, smiling and excited, Harry could see how easy it would be to love a woman like Lucy.

"Last week, I think, " Lavender looked at Harry silently asking the date.

"Sunday," Harry answered.

Lavender brightened. "Yes! Sunday. We had the worst luck! An Auror on his smoke break caught us on our way out."

Harry couldn't help looking at Lavender in awe at her balls to casually tell the highest power in the country how they broke into private property and got caught. You could call Lavender many things, but coward wasn't one of them.

"No!" Lucy exclaimed much to Lavender's joy.

"Of course, I tried to sweet talk him but he was having none of it. I thought we were done for. I was already imagining what to say to my



parents when they bailed me out. Just as they were leading us away, Harry saved us," Lavender gushed.

Lucy's eyes were big like a saucer plate, "how?!"

Lavender looked smug. Harry was sure that it was because she had finally cracked Lucy and her love for juicy drama. "He recognized the Auror's name."

"It was Bethanie's husband, Carl" Harry interjected.

"And then?" Lucy asked Lavender.

"Harry started talking about how Bethanie couldn't stop talking when Carl sent her flowers to work last week and how, now that he had met him, Harry could tell he was a good and honest man. The man was so confused but pleased. He invited us to his kid's birthday party and we went out for drinks at the end of his shift. It was so surreal."

"Which one is Bethanie again?" Riddle asked Harry. Harry has him almost up to date on all office gossip and all the main characters.

Harry tried to remember any occasion Riddle might have interacted with her, "Remember when there was a missing stapler and somehow, not at all related, someone lost a hand and the entire third floor had to be interrogated by the Auror Department?"

Riddle nodded slowly as he recalled the event. "Well, Bethanie's desk was the one they found the hand. Framed, she says," Harry explained. Riddle makes a wordless 'ah'.

Not that Harry ever cared to tell anyone, but it had been Granny Minnie's stapler. They had been fortunate to just lose a hand.

Lucy laughed, "Harry, how do you remember so much about people? You are like an encyclopedia."

Harry shrugged, "I make a point to remember."

"Why?" Lavender wondered. "Bethanie is my friend and even I didn't know half the things you mentioned."

Harry shrugged and brought his beer to his lips to not answer. He shifted in his seat when everyone stared expectantly, "It's useful."

"There's a story there," Lavender guessed.

"Eh. Maybe a story for another time. It's depressing as hell," Harry tried to laugh it off.

"I want to know," Riddle chimed in with his crocodile eyes. Harry glared at him for a second. Harry had the theory that Riddle used Lucy and Lavender to wheedle information out of him and no one can convince him otherwise.

"How bad could it be?" Lucy pushed.

The only one with a heart, Lavender, quickly backtracked, "You don't

have to answer, I was just curious."

Now it will be more awkward not to answer and he'll feel like a douche. "Don't say I didn't warn you." Even resolving to tell the story, Harry had trouble getting the words out so he forced them with a casualness he didn't feel.

"So, there was this kid once, younger than me. He admired me a lot. Thought the sun shined out of my ass. I found him annoying. Avoided him every time I could. Anyway, he died," Harry dropped without preamble to Lavender and Lucy's silent horror. "His family had me speak at his funeral because with how often he mentioned me they thought I was his best friend." Harry looked down and tried to peel the label of his beer. "I didn't know a single thing about him. I didn't remember a single conversation because I wasn't listening, just looking for a way to escape."

"Muggle?" Riddle asked. Harry was sure he did a quick rundown of any young man who died around the time of Harry's childhood and couldn't find anyone.

"Muggle parents," Harry responded, the closest he could to lying to Riddle without raising any red flags.

"I'm sorry I insisted," Lucy apologized, shamed-faced.

Lavender closed her mouth when Harry turned his eyes to her, "What was his name?" She asked softly.

"Colin. He was sixteen when he died."

Riddle raised his drink, "To Colin."

Everyone followed Riddle and raised their glass, "To Colin," they all repeated.

Harry thought the night went well with one glaring exception. In one of Lavender's dramatic retelling of a work event, hands flying as she explained, Riddle suddenly grabbed her hand and pushed up the sleeve of Lavender's blouse to see bruises encircling her wrist in distinct rope-like patterns.

Lavender quickly moved her hand away letting the long sleeve cover her wrists. She laughed nervously, "I bruise easily."

Harry changed the subject and Riddle did not mention it again so Harry was hopeful (delusional) that Riddle would forget about it. Or simply not understand the context. But after that, he made a point to heal any bruise he left on Lavender.

"What are you doing?" Harry bewilderedly asked Pike. Pike was kneeling with his head down.

"Praying," he responded without looking up.

Harry blinked in confusion, "Why?"

"My therapist recommended a daily prayer."

"You are an atheist."

Pike finally opened his eyes and stood up. "I lie when nervous. Now it's too late to go back. She thinks I'm a devout Merlinian. But it's fine. My parents were fanatics so I know all the prayers and holidays."

"...That's not what I was worried about. That's fucked up. What else have you lied about?"

"Ehhh. it's better if she doesn't know me that well."

"She's your therapist. How's she even helping?"

"I get days off for going but enough about that. You ready to get beaten to a pulp -I mean- ready for practice?"

Harry followed him to the locker room to leave his bag and grabbed a towel. Aurors nodded when they passed by. Harry was a familiar face in the Auror's gym.

Pike poked his forehead and Harry swatted it away. "You have that frowny frown. What happened?"

"It's nothing."

Pike did not even look at Harry as he pushed close his locker. "Really?" Pike did nothing to hide his skepticism.

"Just. Something that Lavender said that is bothering me. Do you think I'm seeing her as..." he lowered his voice to a whisper, "our Lavender?"

"I don't know. Are you?"

Harry frowned and followed him to the workout machines in silence.

When everyone arrived, Harry stopped his warm-up and greeted them. The group was less than ten all together and a mix of experienced Aurors and new recruits. "Ok, thank you guys for coming in your free time for this exercise. I don't want anyone to be alarmed-"

"Instantly alarmed," Pike said loudly and turned to Martinez, "Are you alarmed?"

"I bypassed alarmed and jumped into panic weeks ago. The moment Potter asks for backup you know shit is going down," Martinez responded. Harry turned his glare from Pike to Martinez. Harry shook his head sad betrayal at Martinez feeding Pike's shenanigans. Martinez smiled unrepentantly, he wasn't here as Head Auror but as Harry's friend.

Harry pushed on, "I thought it best if we practice defensive positions as a group in case we are overwhelmed with numbers. Not that I think that will happen-"

"That's exactly what he thinks will happen," Pike countered.

"But it's better to be prepared," Harry finished, smiling placidly at

everyone. Once everyone was distracted he scowled at Pike. Pike cheekily smiled back.

"Do we need to worry about being overwhelmed?" Simon, Martinez's friend and long-time auror asked, "And Ineri? I thought we were seeing some runes."

"As I said, no need to be alarmed," Harry repeated.

"Maybe we should make this an official case if we are going to need backup," Another said.

Harry raised his hands to calm the voices, "No need. This is on a just-in-case basis. On the spirit of being overly precautions."

"Potter I wasn't alarmed until you emphasized how unalarmed I should be. Now I'm getting fucking alarmed. Don't think Martinez doesn't talk about the shit you get up to," Mark said with a suspicious frown.

*Martinez doesn't tell you half of it, Harry thought, or you would be significantly more worried.* Out loud he said, "Best case scenario: we are going to see some nice ruins and maybe encounter the odd curse set up as security against invaders."

Simon raised an eyebrow, "And worst case?"

"Worst case scenario is that we are going to be fighting through a horde of cursed Ineri-like creatures that eat human flesh and if they escape we might be the reason humanity goes extinct."

Mike looked pale and sick. "Right. No pressure."

"Who here knows how to handle firearms? Ok, only three? Come here and pick whatever firearm you feel more comfortable handling. They have unlimited bullets."

"Why firearm?" Mike asked at the same time Simon asked, "Where the hell you got all of this from?"

Harry chose the first question and pointedly ignored the second, "Are you really going to muster all your hate every time you want to kill something? Too bothersome. I don't have that kind of rage anymore."

"Anymore?" Someone from the back asked alarmed.

Harry ignored it. "Point is, it's easier and faster than the killing curse

against a potential army."

"Army?! No one said anything about an army," increasingly agitated voices asked.

"What's the plan?" Martinez cut through.

"Ok, so the plan. Part one starts with entering. We are going under Lake Tritan to a hidden underwater cave. We will use a wind tunnel on the lake because I'm not going to touch that freezing water." The last time he had been there it was summer and the water had still been freezing. "We will place a barrier outside the cave entrance. Once we enter there will be no leaving until we are done. Nothing will be able to cross that barrier until I dismantle it to prevent....any possible contamination," and the end of humankind. "Then we are going to muscle our way in because it's too bloody complicated to open the how it's meant to be opened." Too much finicky magic that Harry was not going to deal with. "After we enter we are going to create another barrier to have a respite against a possible onslaught."

"Possibly onslaught of what exactly?"

"Inferi," Harry explained yet again using a word that was familiar to everyone and close to what Harry expected because explaining the possible remains of an ancient civilization after a catastrophic ritual error was just too time-consuming and not exactly relevant. "Part two is figuring out if we are taking a calming walk or battling it out. If it's the first then great! if it's the second then we move on to part three which is to see if the curse that created the inferi is reversible. We will take a sample specimen and I have a ritual prepared that may work in reversing the curse and if not at least tell us if it's reversible. Unless it's self-defense, no one is to kill any creatures until we have confirmation of what they are."

"May work? What if it doesn't work and we are stuck there with who knows what?"

Harry ignored that ridiculous question. It will be his barrier and he or anyone with the knowledge and power could bring it down if necessary. They will not be trapped. Harry was just closing the only exit and making sure that no fool panicked, ran to the exit, and just left it open. "If it's reversible then we will try that. We might need time to do that. In case it is reversible but the ritual does not work we will retreat and let specialists come and take over. It is important that no matter how monstrous they might look, a real human soul could be

suffering inside, and killing the shell could condemn the soul to eternal purgatory. If not the human, we at least have to try to save the soul. If there is no soul or human or intelligence left and we have confirmation of that by third-party sources then it's open season and the unlimited bullets will come in handy." Harry will destroy all evidence of the curse before letting it fall into the wrong hands... or spread. It is not the sort of thing that should be duplicated, even for the sake of learning.

"Now, logistics. To be on the safe side, take at least three days worth of food and water."

"Three days?"

"Everyone pack for five weeks!" Pike bellowed, "Five weeks you hear me?"

"I'm hoping we don't need it but it's better to be prepared."

"In case we get trapped down there? Potter, I don't do well in closed spaces."

"I have a lawyer and the owner of the London Magical Museum. They'll be contacting you sometime this week. You can sell your share of whatever we find beforehand for a fixed price. If you sell your share and we don't find anything, then you have secured 50,000 galleons from this excursion. If we find something then you'll have sold your share and get only fifty thousand of the possible millions. The lawyer will answer any doubts, make sure everything is legal, and that no one is coerced. Also, sign a waiver that relieves me of responsibility in case of death or injury."

Uproar.

Harry sighed. He doubted they would have time for the exercises now. Oh well, another day.

He buys a light green shirt with a silly chicken because it reminds him of Claude. That day everyone smiled at him.

He realizes that he wants more of that. Fun, colorful, and silly, and nothing like the serious Auror Potter, defeater of Lord Voldemort. It's almost like dressing up as a different person. And it's exactly what he wants. He wants to separate himself physically and mentally from Harry the warrior and Harry the survivor. Maybe that had been the



mask. He had never been allowed to be silly. And it makes him happy. He also found a knitted sweater that is pastel blue with white clouds that move by an invisible wind.

"You look like a bunny," Pike tells him. "Disgustingly harmless."

"It looks cute," Leliana gives him a thumbs up.

People are nicer to him. Even Riddle starts treating him differently. Like he is someone that could break.

He could use people being kinder for a while.

There's a funeral for Regulus. Closed casket obviously. It's a state affair with a lot of fuss. Harry goes with Riddle and waits to the side while Riddle gives his planned speech on the deceased's bravery.

An intern wrote the speech. It's very pretty and meaningless. Harry looks at Sirius's crying face in the front row with the marauders surrounding and supporting him, his face destroyed in a way that makes it uncomfortable to stare. James Potter looks so much like how Harry used to look that it is almost like seeing himself from another's vantage point.

Harry stares at his reflection in the mirror across the room. This face with dimples and fuller lips is more Lily than James. Maybe it's the cheeks that are not sunken in from chronic starvation. Harry studies Lily's face and carefully dissects her features and how they look on his siblings.

The oldest has just graduated Hogwarts and apparently had done very well in her exams. Harry wondered if she will be working in the Ministry with her father and godfather and if he would see more of her now. The youngest was looking at Harry and hadn't stopped since Harry entered the room. Harry carefully smiled back and the boy was startled out of his contemplation and looked forward. He was cute. Harry would have burned the world to the ground to have siblings.

The heartbreak he felt at the possibility of what he could have had if only things had been different felt indescribable. If only his parents were different. If only he was different enough to fit their mold. If he had met them earlier, younger. If only they had existed in his world. But they had not, he could not, and they did not. It would kill him if he thought about it too much. It had killed him.

He felt Riddle's piercing stare on him and Harry forced the melancholy out of his thoughts to not distract Riddle.

"Hey," Riddle called him when the public service finally ended. There will be a private family service at his parent's house. Harry wasn't invited. He pretended he didn't care. Harry was very good at pretending he didn't care.

"Let's take the afternoon off," Riddle offered.

Harry smiled, emptyly, "Sure."

They chose an outside table at a small restaurant close to their apartment building. Harry spent the time harassing Tom about being the only wizard without a phone. Harry had no doubt that Riddle only humored the conversation to distract him from the funeral.

"I don't need it," Riddle insisted.

"In this day and age, it is a necessity. Oooor you could tell your snake to stop eating the owls. I've had several complaints. Including accusations that you don't feed your snake. How they can see that land whale and think it's starving speaks a lot about our school system."

"Our school system is fine," Riddle defended distractedly as he ordered their food.

When the waiter left Harry continued as he never stopped, "Come on" Harry wheedled, "It's easier and less of a headache than putting that snake on a diet."

Riddle grimaced at the words snake and diet used in the same sentence but reluctantly agreed to buy the phone. Harry blinked in surprise, not really thinking Riddle would ever agree. He must think Harry's mental well-being was on the brink. Awesome.

Harry could not deny he was sufficiently distracted as he hopped to the Magical Muggle Machines store after their meal. Harry was not going to let Riddle have time to regret his choice.

"Why do you have the Australian ambassador Timothy Campbell as Tim No-olives on your phone? In fact, why do you even have his

number?" Riddle asked as he looked through Harry's phone and compared it with a magical phone book.

Harry stared blankly as he passed Riddle a glass of wine and sat down on his second-hand, unstable balcony chair. "I have no idea. I don't know any Tim."

Riddle grunted, not looking up. "Of course, you don't."

"Maria Barbados? Why do you have the number of Australian Secretary of State as Maria Barbados? Her last name is Campbell."

"I don't remember but I'm seeing a trend so probably from the concert. I don't remember half of the night." Harry scrunched his nose. "The smell of tequila still makes me want to vomit. Also, stop scrolling through my contacts."

"I'm learning," Riddle defended. "You wanted me to have a phone so I have to learn."

"You seem comfortable enough if you can identify numbers by sight."

"I have a photographic memory."

"And yet you forget-."

"I've had people that want to kill me be less critical of me," Riddle snapped with a glare.

Harry stared.

"They didn't know you half as well or they would have redoubled their efforts," he responded with a sweet smile.

"I hate you," Riddle grumbled.

Harry doubted it. He started with his favorite sport, bullying Riddle. He will be disappointed if by the end of the conversation, Riddle doesn't throw a spell or two. "Only you would get possessed by a demon and have an improvement in temperament."

That won him a stinging hex. Harry laughed as he avoided it.

Harry met with one of his Vomit Alley buddies on his way to Pike's.

"Bob! How are you?"

"Happy. I talked with a normal human being on my way here. They were not on fire when I was talking with them. And then I rode my lawfully-gained broom to my very still-standing place of work." Harry was nine-hundred percent sure Bob was an alien. He carefully did not look at Bob's unnatural shadow with slow-moving tentacles protruding from the human silhouette.

"Oh wow, really? That sounds positively mundane," Harry responded because it was none of his goddamn business.

The alien smiled, pleased, "It was."

"You keep working on your completely normal not at all suspicious life. I'm sure as hell also working on it." With similar results.

"Harry Potter, I have the need of a favor. I will pay for services rendered in the official currency of the country. This country. That we are living in. But if you want nonofficial currency I am willing to render this perfectly human body for a mundane sexual experience. It will probably not poison you."

That's more than the prostitutes of Vomit Alley can promise.

"Sure, but don't worry about paying, what do you need Bob?"

"I need to fill out this job application," he passed Harry a stack of papers.

"You said your place of work was still standing when you left?" Harry checked.

"Yes," Bob said with a smile.

Jesus.

An alien shouldn't be learning about humans by living in Vomit Alley.

But if they are an alien, is it a meat suit, or is it some type of possession like demons?

"Harry."

Was there a person before?

"Harry."

Should he be worried about body-snatching aliens? Or are they super-advanced that they can imitate a human body? Grow their own body? That would be fascinating.

"Harry," Riddle growled.

Harry blinked back to existence. He looked at Riddle questioning, "Yes?"

"Have you heard anything we've said?"

Oh, right. The super secret meeting where they would discuss Very Important Stuff and there was a suspicious lack of paperwork or schedule involved. Because Top Secret obviously.

"Of course." Not. "What part, in particular, did you want me to comment on?" It would work better if Riddle didn't already know his bullshitting methods. Pity.

Why was he here again? He could be doing laundry. Or drinking acid. So many options. All of them better than being here.

Riddle sighed in resignation. "Harry, what do you think about Mr. Malfoy being the next Minister of Magic?"

Harry sat up from his slouched position in a second. Extremely alarming.

Riddle had officially all of Harry's attention.

"It would be easier installing him temporarily while we work on the laws that prohibit me from continuing," Riddle explained to Harry's silent confused horror.

Lucius Malfoy tried not to look nervous or obviously intimidating so he looked constipated. Yeah, you should be scared. Harry in a soft pink cardigan will destroy your political career before it has the

chance to start.

"I'm not sure how valuable my opinion is," Harry demurred. And also on the list of not his fucking business. Why care when he could not.

"Harry," Riddle warned, not in the mood for games.

Such a fun killer. Harry gave it serious thought. "I don't think the voters would go for an obvious conservative candidate. Someone with conservative values but the facade of progressive would be more suitable. It would appeal to the older and younger generation." Even a temporary Minister needed to be voted in for the sake of maintaining the illusion of democracy.

Riddle gave it some thought. "Who would you suggest?" He finally asked.

There are a lot Harry would love to have as Minister but would not work as the puppet Riddle wanted. "Do you want to pass reforms during that time or just keep the house from burning down?" Harry checked.

"A few reforms, but it's more important to keep the other side from gaining control during that time."

Harry thought carefully about everyone he knew that was the proper age for a Minister and could be progressive sounding without actually being progressive and on top of that be controllable. The meeting kept going as Harry thought.

Riddle stopped mid-word and turned to Harry, "You thought of someone."

"Yeah," Harry agreed. Riddle seemingly mind-reading Harry, while not looking at him or having his wand in hand, will haunt the entire table for decades to come. Harry suppressed a smile by drinking coffee.

"Who?" Riddle asked as he rhythmically tapped his quill to the table in agitation.

"Eldritch Diggory."

Riddle frowned in thought. "I'm not familiar with him."

Harry wasn't surprised, Riddle did not look out of his tight circle often. Harry pushed Riddle from his mind when the man impatiently

wanted his reasoning.

Riddle frowned at Harry as if it was Harry who was being difficult. Harry extended his hand. Credit card? Riddle left his mind with an annoyed tsk.

"Why him?" Riddle grudgingly asked out loud. As he should, if he didn't want to pay for the privilege, nay, the honor, of being in Harry's mind. Cheap-ass.

"Pureblood name, reputable family with progressive leanings and they are not obviously pureblood bigots..." While still being pureblood bigots.

"And?" Riddle prodded knowing there was more and one second away from diving head-first into Harry's mind consequences to his balance account be damned. Harry warned Riddle with a look that he would bleed him dry if he dared after Harry explicitly denied him.

Once Riddle calmed down, Harry explained, "And he looks at you like you are a god. His god. And looks at everyone around you with hate and envy. He would cut his arm for your attention and a leg to keep it."

"We can continue this discussion over dinner," Malfoy suggested.

Harry looked at Riddle with a placid smile as he started mentally composing his resignation letter in case Riddle decided to prolong his workday.

Riddle met his eyes for a second before responding, "Gentlemen, it's been a long day, we can continue this in the morning."

Of course, we can. Riddle didn't even have to dive into his mind to know that.

There was one thing he didn't consider when he nominated Eldritch Diggory. That the same obsession with Riddle that made him so good to manipulate would also cause him to hate Harry. It was a thing he should've thought before he was falling off the fifth-floor after the man had pushed him. Riddle apparated him back before Harry even had the chance to think how to save himself.

Harry never asked what happened to Eldritch Diggory but he also never saw the man again. Also, they should have physical railings and

not magical ones that are easily tampered with.

Harry was peacefully enjoying his night with a bottle of red wine and was just about to start thinking about dinner when Riddle burst through his front door, the door handle making a hole in his wall. Harry sighed and topped his glass until it was almost overflowing and took a long gulp to steel his nerves.

"Lucy left me," Riddle all but roared as he slammed the front door.

Good for her.

"...Why?" Harry still asked gamely. So many reasons. Which one finally did it?

Riddle agitatedly paced in Harry's small living room. Harry stared mournfully at the couch saying goodbye to his plans to relax with a glass of wine and a book.

At first, Harry thought Lucy saw Riddle as a designer bag. A sign of excess wealth and social class. Something others wanted and she had. She didn't ask for much of Riddle. A bag was meant to be an accessory and enhance her look. And they could have lasted a lifetime like that. As far as Harry was aware, Riddle was content with the mimicry of a relationship. But then she fell in love and wanted his time and attention. It might have still worked if she genuinely thought Riddle didn't have the emotional capacity to deliver. But she saw him with Harry and she wasn't a dummy.

"She said I was a sociopath."

Harry waited a moment for the second part that never came.



That's it? Not prioritizing basically anything and everything over her? Not buying the assistant an apartment? Not creepily obsessing over the assistant? Not working every day, all day? And with said assistant? The fact Riddle was a sociopath wasn't even in the top ten of his guesses. Harry was perfectly aware of how their relationship looked from the outside. It didn't matter that Riddle never touched more than his shoulder. They had great chemistry and flirted all the time. People notice and talk.

"And?" Harry prodded for more information. He took out a pot from the cupboard. Might as well get dinner started.

"And nothing."

Harry stared incredulously, pot hanging limply from his hand. "You've always been a sociopath."

"That's what I told her. Are you hungry? Why do you keep thinking about popcorn?"

"Don't worry about it," Harry dismissed. "Intrusive thoughts. Let's go back to your problem, it's not like you go to any length to hide you're a sociopath. On Wednesday you told her brother you would chop him into bite-size pieces and feed the poor starving fish at the canal if he didn't shut up. She laughed. Did she think it was a joke?"

Riddle stopped his pacing. "To be fair, most people do think I have a dark sense of humor and not that I'm literally seconds away from killing them," he admitted.

Harry sipped his wine as he contemplated. "Did you explain that you

refrain from mass murder to avoid giving political opponents blackmail material?"

Riddle looked confused. "Should I have? I feel that isn't reassuring to most people."

"I find it reassuring. You love your job. What else did she say?"

"She said I was controlling."

A surprised laugh exploded out of Harry. He mentally high-fived Lucy. "You?! Never," Harry drawled.

Riddle gave him a warning look. Harry ignored it as he looked at the cabinets to see what he could use for dinner.

"Demanding," Riddle continued.

"What! How dare she," Harry exclaimed as he now considered the contents of his fridge.

"Possessive," Riddle all but spat.

"Oh, but we are your priceless possessions," Harry turned back smiled wickedly, and winked just to see Riddle's brain melt. "I feel like it makes a difference somehow."

When Riddle's brain went back online he continued as if he had never

stopped, "Overbearing."

"And here I thought she didn't know you," Harry murmured as he resigned himself to do some shopping tomorrow. He took out a packet of pasta and filled a pot with water.

"That she couldn't trust I wasn't always manipulating her," Riddle continued without having heard Harry or simply ignoring him. The list was longer than Riddle first made it out to be. It should have been *Sociopath et al* .

"That's preposterous," Harry responded, innocent as apple pie.

Riddle looked vindicated. "Exactly."

"You are always manipulating her." Riddle's face fell. "It's more than obvious, it's just on her if she wishes to play along or not. And she does her fair share of manipulating with her cutie act." Or tries. Riddle is as receptive as a cactus.

Riddle sighed tiredly. "I tried explaining that we all manipulate, even children. It's just a way of interacting with other humans but with a clear goal in mind."

Harry looked at Riddle horrified. "Oh no."

"What?"

"You shouldn't have told her that," Harry murmured as he salted the

water.

"She left me immediately after. So of course now I know it wasn't the right thing to say."

Harry poured the pasta into the boiling water, "Yeah, you fucked up."

"You would have understood," Riddle said resentfully.

Aaaand time for a subject change. "I'm making pasta, you want some?"

"Yes, please. Are you looking to share any of that wine or not?"

Harry looked at the wine bottle and considered it for a long moment. Aunt Petunia would be horrified at his bad manners. He sighed. "Fine. You just got dumped, it's the least I can do. Are you sad?" Harry asked awkwardly. He hoped Riddle didn't need emotional support. Harry would not be able to deal with Lord Voldemort's emotional breakdown over a relationship. It would send him to St. Mungus. Or he would laugh one too many times and be killed. Same thing.

"I'm frustrated. I was being an ideal partner. Wow, your brain just exploded. Care to share your many, many, many thoughts on that?"

Harry's eyes widened and he took a long sip of wine. "No. Not really." He packed every thought in a vault and continued with dinner. Tomatoes. Right, right tomatoes. For sauce. Goes well with pasta.

"I would appreciate my...*friend* explaining why I'm not an ideal

partner."

Harry laughed nervously. Oh boy. Harry opened the fridge to look for tomatoes. "No, you don't. You think you do, but you don't."

Riddle's eyes narrowed. "I think I'm a good source of knowledge on what I want. And what I want is for you to tell me why I'm not the ideal partner."

"Do you want white sauce or red sauce with the pasta?" Harry deflected. He didn't have tomatoes so hopefully Riddle didn't pick red sauce. He could go down to the store and get them, Harry considered. Then buy a train ticket and disappear for long enough that Riddle will forget this was ever a conversation.

"Harry," Riddle said very carefully as he slowly walked forward. "I need to know why you think I wasn't being an ideal partner."

"We need tomatoes. I'm going to buy some at the store. I can be back in a few minutes, you can make yourself comfortable. Maybe change clothes?"

Riddle blocked his exit.

Harry passed an agitated hand over his hair, "Riddle, I don't want to have this conversation. Ask Lucy. You know, -your actual ex-girlfriend-, for her feedback."

Riddle slowly boxed him in. Harry's anger surged and he breathed deeply to hold it back. "Back off, Riddle."

Riddle's face hardened. "No. I don't think I will. You will tell me now."

The thing is that when Harry gets angry *he gets mean*. And he was trying really hard not to get angry at Riddle and say some unfortunate truths.

Harry breathed deeply, "Riddle, I get it, you are angry. It sucks to be dumped. We can go out to a bar. Get drunk. Use drugs. Do you use any drugs?" Harry wasn't sure. "Not like hardcore drugs, just something relaxing, like pixie dust. Or psychedelics if you are into that. I know a guy that sells werewolf mushrooms. If you are really feeling it, we could take it all and hope for the best."

Riddle's face turned confused, "You do drugs?"

"...No, of course not. I was just saying, if you want to do drugs, I won't let you do them alone. For safety. Buddy system and all. Also, it's cheaper in bulk."

The distraction did not work for more than a confused blink and Riddle went back to furious. "Harry," Riddle growled.

Harry snapped. Fuck him. If he wants the ugly truth, Harry will happily give it. "Fine! Just fine! Where do I start? You did not listen or care about her thoughts or wishes."

"When!" Riddle hotly asked.

"She told you she liked tulips. You got her roses. She told you not to

mess with her job. You had a meeting with her boss and she was promoted. Frankly, I'm impressed she didn't leave after that one."

"I was trying to be a good boyfriend," Riddle defended.

"A good boyfriend respects their partner's wishes and boundaries," Harry threw back. "Your care was purely performative."

"I took her to the best places."

"She doesn't like Quidditch so VIP passes for her are a waste. She hates posh restaurants and you took her to the most obnoxious restaurants you found."

"What should I have done then?"

"Either something she likes and wants or something you like and want and alternate between the two. You underestimated how good she is at noticing nonverbal cues and just disrespected her intelligence left and right by doing meaningless gestures."

Riddle walked away from Harry and the conversation in an effort to calm down. "What gestures are meaningful?" Riddle finally asked, in a controlled, measured tone this time.

"I don't know!" Harry threw his hands up. "Honest ones!"

"Ok. Anything else?"

Oh, Harry could go on the entire night. "You always showed her that she was last on your list of priorities. Work came first. I came first. You always picked everything but her and everyone has their limits. To be honest she lasted a hell of a lot longer than I expected."

"Would you date someone like me?"

"God no. You are a nightmare. Add the workaholic tendencies and it's better to date my hand." He regretted it as soon as he said it. Riddle reeled back as if he had been physically struck.

"Don't be shy about being honest, Harry," Riddle said sarcastically.

"You'd try to pick at my brain if you thought I was holding out," Harry accused, maybe unfairly. Riddle wasn't that invasive with the mental link, only passively receiving information and paying the price when he actually wanted to deep dive.

Riddle glared. "Take it as a warranty that I won't be trying to seek more information on the subject."

Harry deflated and concentrated on cooking. It took less than a minute before he broke under the silence and guilt, "I'm sorry, you are feeling shit and I'm making it worse. But take it as a lesson to not ask things you don't want to know. We can't exactly lie to each other except by omission or diversion." Harry started on the white sauce.

Riddle pulled himself back together. "So how can I be better?"



Harry looked at him flatly, "Go to therapy for fuck's sake."

Riddle did not even hesitate. "What other thing can I do?"

"Well, it was worth a try," Harry muttered. "Look, Riddle, it's not that hard. Communicate better. If you are mad or frustrated say it directly to the person, explain why, and listen to their response. Take others' suggestions seriously. Be honest, but not too honest," Harry felt the need to clarify. He should've just skipped that one entirely, "Accept no without pushing or trying to convince. And compromise for fucks sake."

"Would you date yourself?"

"Would I date myself?" Harry repeated the strange question to make sure he got it right. Riddle nodded. "Fuck no. I'd be a disaster."

"Why?"

Harry did not even have to think about the answer. He knew all the ways he was a trainwreck. "I self-sabotage. I'm so unused to having good things that when I do I don't know what to do, get anxious and paranoid about losing it, and run away." Poor Ginny. After years together, he left her with a note stuck on the fridge. "I've gotten better with therapy and I have surrounded myself with people who would slap me in the face if they felt it was warranted, but feeling like a strange, burdensome, and unlovable thing is not something you shake off easily and prance to the rainbow for the perfect ever after. I have like a thousand hangups that would explode at the most minimal bump in the road. Fears and insecurities by the ton. They'd say they want to resolve a problem and I'd burn down the whole relationship because it's better to leave than to be left."

"Fuck," Riddle concluded.

Harry agreed.

Riddle dropped his jacket and keys and went to his pantry, "I need firewhisky."

"Sure, let's get drunk after that conversation. I foresee nothing bad happening."

"Is that a no?" Riddle asked after a pause.

Harry sighed. "Bring it. I could use a night of bad decisions."

"...Am I a bad decision?" Riddle asked with blank eyes.

Harry opened his mouth and closed it in shock. What. "Riddle we are not having sex. We'll eat pasta, drink whisky, and watch a movie. That door has closed. I was talking about being hungover at work tomorrow."

"Why?"

Harry looked at Riddle in confusion. "Why what?"

"Why is that door closed?"

"You did not want a one-night stand?" It came out as a question.

"I don't like that you talk about it as something permanent."

"You don't like that I'm respecting your boundaries?" Harry asked, confused and annoyed all over.

Riddle pursed his lips. "I could change my mind and want a one-night stand."

"There still wouldn't be a one-night stand because I wouldn't have casual sex with someone that already expressed their disdain for casual sex and is just having a shit night."

"Why not?"

Harry looked at Riddle helplessly. "What do you mean why not? Because it's a crappy thing to do and I wouldn't do that to anyone. Least of all a friend." It felt like taking advantage of someone in a low, vulnerable moment. "Also work and sex don't mix." Not that that had ever stopped Harry. But it was still good advice.

*But I'll happily quit if you want to explore that option...? Not today, obviously. He wasn't a monster. But some day in the future. No, Harry, bad thoughts. You need the apartment bills paid. One night of sex is not worth a good-paying job.*

*...Or is it? Jobs are a dime in a dozen.*

"They don't," Riddle agreed. Cutting Harry's dangerous train of thought. At least Riddle had some good sense. Harry will deny to his dying breath this moment of weakness. If it stays in your head it doesn't count. *Right?* Right.

"You should leave Lavender." And here Harry was giving the man credit.

"She is not my boss. And just tangentially a coworker. Hardly the same department."

"The water is overflowing," Riddle pointed out.

"Shit." Harry took it off the heat.

"You always make pasta."

"Bold of you to assume I know how to make anything else." Fried food and pasta were the limits of his culinary ability. He may or may not have some childhood trauma surrounding the subject. He'll be a domestic king someday, just not today.

Riddle sat at the kitchen stool nursing his drink and looking pathetic. Harry felt bad. "I can tell you what I did like about you and Lucy," Harry offered as a peace offering. (And to change the topic of sex, work, Lavender, and Riddle which was a dangerous combination for Harry's mind).

Riddle looked up, interested. So Harry continued, "I liked that in your own misguided way you tried to make the relationship work. I liked that you supported her ambitions and never asked her to be less. You

were, for the most part, patient with her moron of a brother... But it was pretty crappy that you were flirting with me while with her. You hurt her feelings and she did not deserve that," Harry couldn't help but add.

Riddle looked offended, "You also flirt with me and you are with Ms. Brown."

"That's different."

"How is it different?"

"Lavender knows." And wants a detailed report on the sex if there ever any sex. Not that Harry would ever kiss and tell. Either way, Harry will definitely, probably, maybe, hopefully not have sex with Riddle. So it won't matter. Maybe.

Fingers crossed.

Harry had no faith in himself.

Riddle looked confused, "She knows?"

"Of course, she knows. Even Snape knows. There are running bets on every floor about us. Granny has to be talked out of waterboarding me for answers every day."

"And she's ok with it?"

Harry shrugged and took a sip of wine. "She's not worried."

"She's not worried?" Riddle repeated with a frown. And then angrily, "Why is she not worried?"

Harry shrugged.

Riddle looked deeply offended. "Does she think you won't cheat on her with me?"

Her only concern had been if Riddle would let her watch. Or consent for Harry to share the memory.

"One, it would not be cheating as we have clear rules on what is and isn't allowed, and two... it's a moot point because we are not together anymore."

Riddle sat up as electrocuted. "Why? When? -Why?"

"Some time ago-"

"And you didn't mention anything?"

"It hasn't come up in conversation."

"I have not seen any change in your relationship."

"As I have mentioned many many times we were casual so we are still friends. No hurt feelings on anyone's part."

"Why?"

"I broke things off with her."

"Why?"

"She mentioned something that made me realize that I...may not have been seeing her as her. I...was seeing someone else when I saw her and that is not fair for her."

"What."

"I'm not explaining it well."

"No."

"Anyway, it doesn't matter why-"

"It very much matters why," Riddle interrupted.

Harry glared, "It doesn't matter why, the point is we are not together anymore."

"You burned the sauce."

"Fuck." Harry mixed it in a vain attempt to "dilute" the burnt pieces. It didn't work.

They both stared at the pot.

"You want to go out to eat?" Riddle finally offered.

Harry looked from his overcooked box noodles to his burnt sauce. "Yeah." He looked down, he was in joggers, a white t-shirt, and a ponytail on top of his head to get the hair off of his eyes that looked like a palm tree. He smelled his shirt. It smelled clean. He wasn't changing. "Let's go."

On their walk back Riddle somehow still had questions. "But did Miss Brown do anything wrong?"

"For the millionth time Riddle, no, she did not do anything wrong."

"Offend you in any way?"

"Still no."

"So it was because you thought she resembled someone you knew and you were maybe projecting your feelings to her. You are not even sure you are projecting your feelings on her."



"Basically."

"So she had no fault in you leaving her?"

"None at all."

"And you still left her?"

"Yup."

"Harry, I think you are being unreasonable."

Harry side-eyed Riddle, "I thought you wanted me to leave her."

"I did. I do. But maybe you shouldn't take these unilateral decisions in things that affect two people. Maybe-

Harry saw Bob walking towards them and panicked.

Harry grabbed Riddle who let himself be pulled too easily for someone his size. "Riddle, look at me. This is serious," he said urgently. "Don't talk to him. Don't look at him. And whatever you do, don't fight him."

Riddle blinked away his dazzled expression. "Wha- why?"

Too late. "Hi, Bob!" Harry greeted cheerfully, letting Riddle go and stepping away. Bob looked from Harry to Riddle back to Harry again.

"Oh, I see," Bob said mildly before smiling and walking away.

Harry's blood ran cold.

"Bob!" Harry called back. "Hey, Bob, what did you see?" Harry loudly asked. "What did you see?" Bob did not turn to look.

"What did he see?" Harry asked Riddle in panic. It could be anything from *I see you are a couple* to *I saw you grab him aggressively so he's your enemy and I need to kill him* to *I see I have to destroy the world*. Bob had very tenuous grasp of being human.

"Who is he? I've never seen you scared of anyone."

"He," it, Harry's mind corrected, "is very dangerous. It's better if you never talk with them."

"A skinny white man in plaid is someone I should fear?" Riddle asked doubtfully.

"I'm serious," Harry insisted.

"That's what I'm worried about. You do know I'm powerful, right?" Riddle grabbed his shoulders and looked at him intensely, "You at least know that, don't you?"

"You are very powerful," Harry acknowledged dismissively, "but just promise me, alright? Don't talk to him if you can help it and if you can't avoid it be very, very polite, ok?"

Riddle sighed. "Ok, Harry. I promise I won't talk to that random man on the street who looked one plate away from starving to death and that I'm probably never going see again anyway, ok?" He had the '*the things I do for you*' annoyed face.

Harry breathed. "Good. Good. Let's go home. But let's take another way to be safe."

"You are so weird."

## Chapter 25

"Per my last note and the one before that," Harry read out loud impressed by the sheer audacity. Nancy woke up and chose corporate violence. Harry could relate on a spiritual level. He skimmed through the rest of the note to find the problem. The first-level bathroom was out of service.

For fucks sake.

Harry sighed audibly and pressed his hand to his eyes. Why was this his problem? Having the vague job of "assistant" with no set role meant he was the dumping ground of problems. He glanced at Riddle's desk and despaired at the shockingly large pile of non-urgent notes that he was expanding a lot of energy into actively ignoring. Was this going to be his life for the next year? Days that dragged with the monotony of solving small problems?

And it's not like he *wants* Riddle to be attacked or someone murdered in the office for incompetence. Except that was a lie and he did kind of want a bit of blood and adrenaline. He felt like a drug addict that relapsed. He saw a bit of action and three years of good behavior went down the drain.

He balled the note and threw it into the pile with the others. After a second thought, the entire pile went up in flames. Just like Nancy, he too chose violence whenever possible.

Fuck you Nancy and fuck everything.

If it was really important he'll hear about it eventually, possibly on another passive-aggressive note.

Riddle ignored the fire on his desk with the admirable composure of someone who had been sharing the same office as Harry for months and was used to his bullshit. Harry was the worst office companion. He was honestly surprised he hadn't gotten booted to the nearest closet yet. Harry talked, read notes out loud, sighed like a damsel in distress, filled the office with his things, and occasionally when he was feeling particularly violent with no outlet, he set things on fire.

Riddle's office no longer looked like an interrogation room from the Tudor period. The dark wood paneling and large desk were still present but Harry's things were all over the office.

From a forgotten 'just-in-case' jacket that has been sitting on the sofa for three weeks now, new and old cups of coffee on every flat surface, a cheerful plant in a silly vase, his unfinished thesis on the only other "free" chair, school books that he brings everywhere with the hope that at some point he will read the assigned chapters and finish his homework. The books were well-travelled but the pages were still crisp. Even the main attraction himself, Riddle, looked significantly more relaxed with his hair freshly washed and combed but not meticulously styled. It might have been because Harry had talked his ear off for two hours this morning until they were almost late. But still, it was an improvement in Harry's humble opinion.

"I need an assistant, Riddle. You got me doing too much work. No one, including me, knows what I do for work but it is easier to pester me than to pester you," as they were significantly less likely to be killed, "so I end up somehow responsible for random shit."

Riddle did not even deign to look up. "You could have more time to work if you stayed after hours."

Harry stared and let the silence permeate the air and get uncomfortable before finally responding, "It's like you don't even know me."

"You have cut the day off by almost half. We are leaving the office at five every day." That was not half the day. "You pitch a fit if I take work home. And god forbid we go to a work dinner. I've never had this much time off. Not even as a teenager."

"Excuse me! *I do not pitch a fit*. I leave you to your work." And go do something else. Naturally.

"Exactly." Riddle crossed out an entire paragraph from whatever he was working on. "You leave."

Harry's eyes acquired a reptilian quality as he observed Riddle without blinking. "I need more time for school," he said casually as he turned back to his notes. "I'm behind in all my classes. But I can drop to part-time and still make it work." It started as a manipulation tactic but that actually didn't sound too bad. It still counted as work, right? His bills would be paid.

At that Riddle finally stopped dividing his attention from work and the conversation to send him a sharp look. Harry pretended not to notice as he twirled his quill.

"I'll see about an assistant," Riddle instantly folded. "How about Draco? You like Draco."

Harry perked up, "I do like Draco. He would have a lovely reaction to the news. Can I please tell him?"

Riddle returned to his work without responding and Harry took that to mean yes. He figured he had done enough for now and grabbed a sugar quill from an obnoxiously colored bowl he had placed in the corner before sitting in his overly stuffed red armchair.

"I thought I lost this," Harry exclaimed happily as he raised his "*world's best assistant*" mug from the floor. A gift to himself because he deserves it. He went from never having worked as an assistant to a corporate shill that made Riddle look like he had a soul to foreign dignitaries. It wasn't much but it was honest work.

"So anyway," Harry continued his story from this morning like he never stopped as he gnawed on the quill and reheated his forgotten tea. He made a face because it tasted like shit but kept sipping. Riddle looked like he was actively ignoring Harry. But Harry knew better. Riddle always listened. Harry was certain Riddle could be obliterated to the moon and back, get a mind-eating curse and brain degenerative disease on the same day and he would still remember every detail of a story Harry told half-drunk one Wednesday afternoon. Riddle made obsessive into his personality.

"So I told her, these are my pearls, *Brenda*," Harry grabbed his new pearl necklace, which sat just at his collarbone. A delicate, almost unnoticeable string of natural baby pearls. "Gilbert gave them to me after you told him they were a fashion crime. Can you believe it?" Harry scoffed as he threw another useless note to the still-burning fire. "A real pearl necklace with a gold clasp?" He asked rhetorically. "None of the twelve grandkids wanted it. She then accused me of trying to steal her grandfather. And I'm like, excuse me, *try?!?* That's my grandfather. I know the names of all of his doctors and I was his emergency contact when he went to the hospital. This is my rightful inheritance. She doesn't even know the story of the pearls; she just wants them because I have them." Harry smiled. "Gilbert is tickled pink at her jealousy. She's now visiting weekly. As she should. Not that it will help. If she didn't want me to steal her grandpa she should have paid more attention."

"That wouldn't have stopped you," Riddle responded with an unreasonable amount of disgruntlement.

Harry grabbed another pile of papers to mindlessly sort through. "Of course not," he cheerfully agreed, "but I would have had competition. Gilbert deserves to be fought over. They practically left the door open and were shocked when someone stole from them. Had that been my grandfather I wouldn't have been so careless."

A familiar name caught his eye. The casual atmosphere destroyed as he read the contents of the note. Riddle frowned at the prolonged silence and looked up zeroing in on the note Harry was holding.

"What's this?" Harry frowned. "A transfer?" He asked in disbelief. "For Lavender?"

Riddle's quill stopped writing and hovered for a second before he put it down and looked at Harry, "Yes," Riddle answered calmly.

Harry glared as he read, "To Australia?"

Riddle clasped his hands and treaded his fingers one at a time, carefully, "Is that a problem?"

"You are transferring Lavender to Australia?" Harry checked, his mind not comprehending. No one had spoken of this. Harry had not heard even a whisper. Harry should have heard about it. Someone would have told him. Unless Riddle purposely hid it.

Riddle gave him his politician smile, "She has impressed many people. It's a great opportunity with a significant salary increase." Riddle got



up, and took the paper from Harry's numb fingers. He calmly stepped back and reclined against the desk. He held the paper close to the flames. "Do you want me to destroy it?" Riddle asked as he let the paper close enough to the flame that it started to smoke. "Because I can. She would never know."

Harry stared, numb as he felt a black hole open in his stomach and take everything with it and leave a vacant, freezing stone.

Riddle smiled. "What's the problem? If she loves you, she will stay. If you love her, you can leave. If it will cause problems between us, I can burn it. Just say the word."

Master manipulator indeed. They both know she will not stay. Not after the red flag conversation on the bus about how she would not prioritize a man over a career opportunity again. They weren't even in a serious relationship; it was barely friends-with-benefits at this point. Harry couldn't go; he needed to finish his degree as he was basically unemployable without it. And it was a moot point. Harry wasn't the type to cripple others' success for selfish reasons.

He'd also bet his right arm that Lavender would 'somehow' find out that because of Harry she lost a job opportunity leading to the end of their friendship and casual fling anyway. As always, Riddle just gave the illusion of a choice.

Harry carefully grabbed the paper from Riddle's hand. Riddle let it go with a victorious smile. Harry had never found him less appealing. A troll had more sex appeal.

Harry felt so stupid. So, so stupid.

It should be a relief, really. He has tangible proof that Riddle can't be

trusted.

Somehow, it's not.

"Harry," Riddle pressed for a response. He couldn't talk. His thoughts jumped and blended together as he reread the letter to see if he missed anything. No. Still Lavender's full name. Still a transfer to Australia.

Harry shouldn't feel anger. He wasn't even dating Lavender. He was the one that broke up with her. And it was ultimately Lavender's decision if she decided to transfer. It was a great opportunity... halfway around the world. Far, far from Harry. As far as Riddle could physically make it. Unreachable by floo. Too far to apparate. Owls take a week to make the round trip. And Riddle controlled the portkeys. Harry was too poor to make the trip by plane more than once a year. If that.

He would not have had any problem if this had happened organically. But the fact that it was engineered to take someone important from him was unforgivable. He felt disgusted. An acrid pool of acid in his mouth. He didn't know if he felt disgusted with himself or with Riddle. What he knew for sure was that he was an idiot for ever trusting this man. For getting close. This happened because he let it. He should have listened to his gut feeling. He knew better. He lived through Riddle's brand of obsession once already. Riddle ruins lives for no reason at all other than he can.

"Harry," Riddle called, softer this time. "Don't overreact. If you think about it, this is the best possible outcome."

If anything, Harry felt he was under-reacting. "The best outcome," Harry scoffed. "For who?" Because it certainly was not the best outcome for him.

"For everyone."

Harry needed to leave. Now. Or else he'll do something very stupid and very violent. He started packing. He grabbed his jacket, minimized the books, threw the cups of coffee in the trash, and shoved everything in his bag.

"Stop," Riddle commanded. "Harry, I have been patient."

Harry sneered, "Patient?" He threw the rest of the unread notes to the fire. Fuck Riddle and fuck them too. He wasn't coming back.

"Yes," Riddle walked closer, "Very patient. But it's time for her to leave."

"Why?" And Harry hated that he sounded more heartbroken and confused than mad. Why do this to me? *I trusted you.*

Riddle walked closer. Harry did not move, could not move, "Harry, my patience is not eternal."

He met Riddle's eyes and spat back all the acid he felt crawling upwards from his stomach from his very soul, "Who's next? Are you sending Gilbert to the moon? Give Pike and Martinez an undercover mission in some remote jungle hoping they don't come back? Can I not talk to you about anyone I care about without fearing losing them? You know, even if you take everyone from me, I still won't choose you."

*Who would ever choose you? You make alone not only seem the better option but the only option.* Harry did not say it out loud but he might have screamed it with how clear the thought reached Riddle.

"I probably deserve that," Riddle answered gently with raised hands as if he were calming a stressed dragon. "I won't take Gilbert away. Or anyone else. You can have anyone you want. But not her."

"Why not her?" Harry questioned softly, lost.

Riddle's eyes turned to stone. "Because I don't want it to be her!" He roared.

Harry smiled, not a nice or happy smile. This is why he had not wanted this. This is his punishment for letting Riddle close. A storm of emotions not letting him settle on one. Happy for her, sad for himself, heartbroken at the lost opportunity, angry at Riddle. But the worst one was feeling betrayed. It felt awful being proven right. Riddle knew Harry was possessive and protective of his people and he still dared. This was a line Riddle knew damn well not to cross. If he did this what else would he do?

Harry smiled, fake and forced. "It's a great opportunity. I'm happy for her. In fact, I'll give her the great news tonight. I'll tell her over dinner. I am taking the rest of the day off."

Harry turned his back and left the office ignoring as Riddle called him back. The moment the door closed all the things he had added to the office disappeared. He wasn't planning on coming back.

"**HARRY!**" The door exploded.

Harry kept walking as if he could not hear or feel the crackling of marble beneath Riddle's polished shoes. People dove to get out of the way. Harry stopped pretending he couldn't do wandless magic and closed every door in front of Riddle's face just to hear them explode behind him. Harry threw floo powder in the first chimney he crossed and saw Riddle's furious face as he flooded away.

Tampering with an active chimney could hurt or kill the person inside. He hated that he still trusted Riddle not to explode the chimney with him in it.

He hid his face on her shoulder as he breathed her in. He pulled her back to his chest and held her tightly.

"Are you ready to talk?" Lavender prodded. She turned her head to meet his eyes and smiled, "Don't get me wrong, I enjoyed whatever this was but you are worrying me."

"I saw transfer papers," Harry said to her shoulder. She stiffened. "So you know," Harry guessed.

"I didn't want to mention anything until it was final."

Harry's stomach dropped. "You want to go?"

"It sounds...different. The pay is better. Hours are not bad. And..."

"And?" Harry prodded.

Lavender hesitated before admitting, "Lucy talked with me. She told

me she pulled some strings and that I should go."

Harry frowned, "Lucy?" He hadn't thought of her in a while. She practically disappeared from his life after she broke up with Riddle.

Lavender nodded. "She said I was in danger and to not trust you."

Harry leaned back so that she could turn and they could talk face to face.

"Danger? Danger from what? And why couldn't you trust me?"

"She said that Riddle will kill me if I don't leave. And that if I told you, you would warn him of her plans and Riddle would kill her. She mentioned Eldritch Diggory."

Technically Harry didn't know what happened to Eldritch Diggory. But he could guess why the man hadn't been seen again after pushing Harry off the fifth floor.

"I would never let anyone hurt you."

Lavender nodded and threaded their hands together. "I know. I trust you. Now, please, trust me. Is Riddle capable of murder?"

Harry sighed, "Yes." Very capable of murder.

She tightened her hold on his hand, "Is he likely to murder me?" She

whispered.

Harry tensed, "I would rip every limb from his body if he tried."

Lavender stiffened. "...that's not a no."

Harry grabbed her face softly and pulled her in by her neck, "Trust that I would never let anything happen to you."

She pulled back, "It's funny. He's jealous of me but really I should be jealous of him."

"Stay."

She sighed, "I trust you." She smiled, a bit sadly, "But I think it's time for me to leave."

She wants to leave. She's afraid. *This is your fault.* "I'll miss you."

"I know."

It was time for Harry to stop his pity party and shove all his feelings in a box until he was alone. "But I'm happy with this opportunity for you and you deserve it. I hope they know they are stealing gold from us." Harry smiled and hoped it looked genuine, "What do you want to do to celebrate?"

If Riddle had really wanted, he could have found Harry. It wouldn't even take special soul magic to do it. Anyone who knew Harry could correctly guess he had been in Lavender's apartment and then the second likeliest place was at his favorite 24-hour taco truck with his two favorite people.

"I think he meant he didn't kill her," Pike unhelpfully added after Harry went into detail of the conversation.

"I got that part, thanks," Harry snapped back.

"Hey, don't take it out of me. This was a perfectly predictable outcome and you are the one who refused to see the writing on the wall as you passionately kissed another woman in front of him."

Harry's glare did not stop Pike.

"To be honest," his friend continued as he ate chips, "I'm glad that out of all the options: murder, murder disguised as suicide, hiring someone else to murder her, falsely accusing her of something and throwing her to prison, banishment, etc, etc, he chose to...transfer her? With a pay increase? Better hours? I will have to start kissing you."

Harry made a face. "Gross."

Pike seemed undeterred, "It's a tough job market out there," he explained. "What did you used to call him? Poodle Voldemort?"

Harry rolled his eyes but corrected him because Poodle Voldemort sounded terrifying. "Golden Retriever Voldemort."



"Harry," Martinez implored when Harry's anger did not budge, "I feel you are not taking this threat as seriously as you should. Let Lavender leave. Don't provoke Riddle."

Harry looked offended, "I would never let anything happen to her."

"I know. But it's a fact of life that he is the government. And government-approved assassination is lawful. Under the current law, a trial is a courtesy, not a right. He has been elected by the people and with an entire chamber that has approved of his laws with no pushback from the public. Him personally assassinating her is just cutting the middle man, saving tax money, and decreasing paperwork. Is it ethical? Hell no. But laws don't have to be ethical and it will not change the outcome. If Tom Marvolo Riddle wishes to give Lavender the death penalty for the crime of insulting him he can. And we can't do anything about it. You'll be imprisoned for obstructing justice. And then having you disappear from the prison and appear in his custom-made basement prison will not take a day. Your disappearance from prison will not even make the news."

A chill went down Harry's back. That sounded...way too plausible. And exactly like Tom Riddle. It did not even take too much trouble imagining it. Why hadn't that already happened? Is the more serious question. "He doesn't have a basement. We live in an apartment building," Harry countered just for argument's sake.

Martinez looked annoyed. "I don't think the place he would store you is the important part."

Harry let that simmer in his brain. Yeah, maybe Lavender leaving was for the best. And he probably should pretend everything is alright until she's out of the country. The problem is he's not sure his acting skills are that good. "The thing I don't get is that it was Lucy. Why would she...?" Harry ate another bite of his taco. He couldn't even be

happy that the nausea was gone as it came at the price of the food tasting like ash.

Martinez passed him a beer before responding, "Potter, she saw him without his mask and rightfully ran for the hills. I'm proud of her. She tried to save another woman she believed was in danger. That takes guts. She's right that if Riddle finds it was her she would be in trouble."

Harry scoffed. "It was him that approved it at every step." Who cares if Lucy was behind the scenes when Riddle had been front and center and all too happy with the plan.

"Maybe," Martinez agreed, "But he's mad and looking for a fight. She'll be blamed. Accused of trying to drive a wedge between you two."

Pike signaled for another round of drinks, "Today he destroyed the battle arena and a few Dead Eaters are in the hospital. You are not going to be popular with that crowd next time."

Harry glared at his taco. "Fuck him. I don't want to see him anymore."

Pike made a disbelieving sound, "So you are quitting?"

Harry thought about it. Really thought about it beyond the raging fire of his anger and the sharp sting of betrayal. Where was he going to find work outside of Riddle's control? He'd have to move out of the apartment. Depend on his friends for money until he finishes his thesis and finds a job as a Curse Breaker. Fuck. That sounded worse than dealing with Riddle for a few more months with a stable income and housing. "...no. I'm not quitting." He didn't officially quit, right? Just loudly thought about it. That doesn't count.

Pike pointed a taco to his face, "Thought so. To be fair, Mr. Fouchy was worse and you managed forty years without killing him once. Not even a little bit."

Martinez frowned in confusion before shaking his head, "That was such a Bob thing to say."

Harry ignored the Bob comment. He didn't want to think too closely that he hadn't seen Bob in a good while. Harry didn't really want any advance notice if the world was ending. Better it be a painless surprise. "Mr. Fouchy had not forced me into abstinence. I think Riddle really will push me to murder if he stops me from having sex for the rest of the year."

Pike made an ungodly sound of a snort and high-pitched laugh that sounded like a pig getting slaughtered.

It released the tension cable that had been strangling his lungs and Harry laughed. "Shut up."

"Did I say anything?" Pike zipped his lips shut. "I'm definitely not telling you that Riddle's plan involves a lot of sex."

Martinez groaned in aggravation with a disgusted look at Pike. "Please don't say the quiet part out loud. I'm still traumatized by how he looks at Harry."

"He doesn't look at me like anything."

Martinez and Pike shared a look. Harry could hear the silent *idiot* from Martinez and such a *moron* from Pike.

Even Harry had a hard time believing that so he added, "And the thought of having sex with him after this is revolting." All of his misfortune could be traced back to a single bad decision. "I should have left him possessed," Harry lamented.

Harry almost turned back when he saw Riddle leaning against his door in the dark hallway.

"It's fucking three in the morning, Riddle," Harry complained.

Riddle stared at him with an unreadable expression. Harry stopped in front of Riddle and stared right back. Riddle looked unfairly handsome. He could be posing for the cover of a magazine with the blue and orange light from the outside stores illuminating his profile.

"Are you leaving?" Riddle asked, angry, resigned.

Harry broke off the gaze and looked out the window. It was a clear night. He swallowed, straightened his back, and responded, "No."

Riddle straightened his pose but still looked wary, "...do I wait for you to floo together to the Ministry?"

"No."

Riddle tensed.

"I'll take a sick day tomorrow. I'll see you the next day." Harry needed

a day to at least be able to paint on a thin layer of professionalism to his face.

"Harry," Riddle extended his hand but Harry stepped back to be out of reach. "I can burn it. I swear it. I acted rashly. I can be impulsive at times. But say the word and it will never see the light of day."

"No need. She signed the contract. It's done."

Riddle looked desperate. "I can prohibit her from going. Ban transfers altogether. Burry that company in so much debt it has to close."

Harry's lips tightened. "No."

Harry closed his eyes and saw his face from Riddle's perspective. He closed the connection. "No," he said louder, firmer. It was the best outcome for Lavender that he could expect from Riddle. Next time Riddle got "*impulsive*" she could end up hurt or worse. "You'll have me all to yourself the rest of the year." *And I'll make sure you regret every single moment.*

*Act nice. Act nice.* Harry smiled, hopefully reassuringly, and not at all forced, "It's for the best. I'll see you the day after tomorrow."

Riddle's eyes got a desperate edge, "Harry, if-

"Now if you excuse me," Harry interrupted, "I have to feed my chicken."

Harry opened his door and was ready to close it when he heard a low, pained, "I love you"

He looked back, furious, and ready to punch Riddle. Fuck being nice. "You know nothing about love."

Riddle took the opportunity to put his body on the door so that Harry couldn't close it. "How can you say that? I'd do anything for you."

"I'm just a priceless *thing* to you!"

The confusion was clear on Riddle's face. "What's so bad about that?"

"Riddle, we cherish priceless *people*. We lock priceless *things*."

"I love you. I have always loved you."

Harry couldn't stand the manipulative lies. Out of all the things to lie about this was the worst, "You can't stand me half the time!"

This made Riddle mad. "Because you are insufferable! And unpredictable." Riddle visibly took a calming breath before continuing, "You heard me torture someone in my living room and I thought surely now he will leave. He will hate me. Fear me. Pretend to be okay before never speaking to me again. So many things ran through my head. In a desperate moment, I thought about obliterating you. Do you remember what you did?"

Harry blinked in confusion. When was this? The six beers he had

earlier weren't helping with memory.

Riddle continued, still looking baffled at the memory, "You...apologized for not eating the fucking salmon."

Ah. Now he remembered. So it hadn't been about the salmon...?

"The salmon, Harry. I've loved you ever since. And suspected you were not all there in the head at the same time."

Harry scoffed. "So I'm not a coward." And worse than he thought at reading the room. "That's not a reason to love someone."

Undeterred, Riddle continued, "You stayed and saved my life even as the pain tore you apart."

"You paid me to keep you safe," Harry batted it away like a fly.

"People stare when you laugh. It's loud. And happy. And carefree. It charms everyone around you. It makes me want to stab their eyes with my wand until they pop and ooze."

Harry looked at him blankly. Was this supposed to convince him of everlasting love? "Lovely," he replied dryly.

"Harry. Please. Let me make it right."

"You don't understand love. You know it's cousin; obsession. Love is

letting someone be happy, even if that happiness doesn't include you." It hurt thinking about letting Lavender go but it was for the best. "You know nothing of love. Nothing about the selflessness of letting someone go. You know nothing about respecting an equal. Of what it means to be a partner. What you know is obsession and owning and disrespect. Talk to me about love when you can hold a relationship longer than you can hold your breath."

Harry tried closing the door.

"I would treat you right!"

Harry was hurt, tired, and mad. He wanted to hurt Riddle. To make him go away and never want to speak to him ever again. And he did it in the worst way possible. With the truth.

"You don't understand, Riddle," Harry finally said, softly, like a dagger. "I wouldn't date you. I would use you to play out my self-loathing impulses."

Riddle reeled back as if Harry had slapped him. Harry took the opportunity and closed the door.

Riddle did not try to stop him.

Saying that the Death Eaters were 'not happy' with Harry was a clear understatement. They were looking for a fight and with Harry, you don't have to go looking for long. Harry was a few hairs short of telling Bob to destroy it all. No point in saving any of it. Let the aliens (or whatever Bob was) take it and make a new world. Or grind it to dust and use it to power their technology. Whatever the master plan was, Harry supported it.



"Bow, Potter," Bellatrix demanded when Harry mistakenly walked into a Death Eater meeting and not a budget meeting as was scheduled on the employee bulletin board. Last time he trusted the bulletin board. He now knew why the ministry never got anything done. The sheer incompetence and disorganization could make a monk cry.

With his simmering anger, embarrassment at the mistake, and annoyance at the bulletin board, Harry opened his mouth and, as it was happening more often than not, out of it poured vitriol. His paper-thin government employee mask fell like cotton candy drenched in water.

"Riddle just has to say the word and I'll get on my knees for him," Harry threw a flirty wink at Riddle to ham in on his point. "Just tell me when and where baby and I'll enthusiastically pray on that altar." He let the horrified silence stretch. "But I see I got the wrong meeting so I'll not interrupt further." Harry turned and left without seeing how his casual disrespect was taken.

Riddle had been taking Harry's cold and hot anger surprisingly well. And by surprisingly well Harry meant that he hadn't been killed, jailed, or otherwise maimed. The other things like taking him out of important meetings, being left to manage superfluous events, and just completely cutting him off the loop of the political climate were just the cherry on top. Less responsibility, less bullshit, same paycheck. *Oh no, please don't punish my insubordination with less work. How would I ever recover?*

And surprise surprise who had taken the bulk of Harry's responsibilities? Well, Draco of course. His supposed help. Did Harry care? Not at all. Harry was consistently leaving at 5pm when all of his duties were attended and Draco was leaving at nine pm looking harried because he put no pressure on his workaholic boss to leave the office. Coincidentally when before everything was resolved by five or there was a solid plan to deal with them the next day, now things were not being done and Riddle had to go back to being a one-man army. Talk about cutting your nose to spite your face.

Instead of working on anything and everything Harry now only had to escort guests to their meeting and leave. After that comment, he wasn't allowed in meetings as he was no longer trusted to "behave". Ridiculous. Harry was perfectly capable of behaving; he just chose not to.

The first time he was asked to leave a meeting Draco had a whole speech planned. Harry only heard the first half of the first sentence before he was moving. The moment the sound that he wasn't allowed in the meeting reached his ears he was gathering his notes and backing away. He should not have smiled and waved as he was gently closing the door but alas, happiness sometimes catches us by surprise.

Was he risking being dismissed? Absolutely. Did he particularly care? Depends on the day. Some days the anger was blinding and he would like nothing more than to drown Riddle in cow manure until it came out of his eyes and ears. Other days it was almost work as usual and he ignored Riddle and went about his day. Riddle unsurprisingly did not react well to either option but being ignored turned him into a possessed demon. This then made Harry mad as no work would get done and the cycle would repeat. Everyone else was just caught in the crossfire.

Harry put everything out of his mind as he reached the entrance of the Ministry to meet the last person he had to escort to their meeting before lunch. Harry raised his eyebrows in surprise. He made eye contact with the greeter to make sure he had the correct person. The greeter's wide-eye nod was all Harry needed to approach the man. He looked like a werewolf and it wasn't Harry stereotyping. The stereotype had to ask this man permission to copy his face and look. But it was none of Harry's business so he ignored the greeter's silent and not-so-silent warnings. Harry gave his usual welcoming spiel and started guiding the man to the elevators.

"He's right you know. I'm dangerous. You should be wary."

Harry scoffed, "What are you going to do? Give me fleas?"

The werewolf's eyes widened and a surprised bark of laughter escaped him. "Oh, you are an asshole." He licked his lips. "I like it."

"Yeah, yeah, big mean wolf eats red ridding hood, we get it, you are a walking cliché. Your meeting room is 310A. Third floor. I'll walk you there."

"Not curious about the reason?" The werewolf asked when they were in the elevator.

"Not really. Would I have made the meeting so close to lunch? Never. But have fun with all the low-blood sugar people. I'm going for lunch. Avoid the fish," Harry warned.

"Wait."

Harry turned back with a curious look.

"You said your name was Potter?"

Harry tensed, expecting to hear about either Potter Senior or Moony and nothing good could come out of either. Harry was just about to open his mouth to say he had nothing to do with whatever his father or his father's friend had done when the man spoke.

"Thank you."

Now Harry was really confused, "Why?"

"It was your signature on the approval papers for my cousin's hotel. It has always been his dream and he never dared hope anyone would give him a chance much less one without jumping hoops. I don't know how you did it or why, but thank you. It gave me hope that the government could change after all."

Harry blinked as he processed that the man had not recognized his family name because well, his family, but because of something he had done, he smiled, genuine this time, "Oh, no problem. I was actually really excited about the project. It seems silly that something like rooms for werewolves to spend the full night don't already exist when we have the magic to make them comfortable and safe. Good luck with your meeting."

*Hope that the government can change.* What an odd thing to say. The government never changes. Werewolves know that better than anyone.

Harry was not curious.

He was one thousand percent not thinking about it.

This is not even his world, why care? But the seed was there and Harry's brain could not stop itself from solving a mystery as it was to cause him anxiety.

"Martinez, has the Auror budget increased?" Harry asked, not at all interested. It will not change anything. He wasn't going to get involved.

Martinez looked surprised, "You didn't know?"

Harry paused. "No, I didn't..." It didn't necessarily mean anything. "When did that happen?"

"They announced it earlier this week. The second one this year."

It was just a coincidence. The idea was preposterous. "...have they increased training dramatically?"

Pike nodded. "It's horrible. Add to the flood of new trainees and we are drowning."

"You know who is a new trainee?" Pike didn't wait for an answer. "Your sister. She's following your father's footsteps and becoming an Auror."

...

Fuck.

Fuck.

*Fuck.*

This suddenly became Harry's problem.

"I've overheard some funny things," Harry casually commented to Draco later. Draco had every reason to look suspicious at Harry's sudden interest in conversation. Harry plowed ahead. "Your father is running on a pro-werewolf platform, isn't he?"

Draco gave him a sneer. "What is it to you? I thought you didn't care?"

Harry rocked on the balls of his feet. "I don't. I'm just... curious."

Draco made a disgusted face, "The beasts will help him get elected. It's popular now to view them as humans."

Harry hummed. He looked at Draco intently. If Draco was disconcerted about the lack of blinking he didn't mention it. "So what rights is he promising?"

Draco's answer was exactly what he feared.

Other than Riddle, his next best source of information was Susan herself. And he wasn't electively talking with Riddle unless under direct threat of termination.

It's a repeated pattern in history where one disadvantaged group suddenly and unexpectedly gets rights it is just in time for...

"Susan, is there a war coming?"

Conscription.

## Chapter 26

Harry furiously crossed out the last sentence he wrote because it was stupid. It made no sense to add it there. He covered his face with his hands and avoided screaming.

It was not his problem. Whatever happened to this shithole of a country was not his problem. The only thing he could do as a concerned citizen was vote and he sure as shit wasn't going to vote for Malfoy Sr. so that he and Riddle could destabilize the country with a war and gain absolute power. What even happened to the last plot for absolute power?

Harry hadn't been paying attention.

It clearly didn't work or else they wouldn't be here.

He had to pay attention to these things.

No, no, no.

No.

Not his monkey, not his circus. Besides, the Ministry is incompetent at best but mostly downright criminally bad at their job so are they really going to be able to coordinate a war? Highly unlikely. They'll arrive at the wrong country due to miscommunication with the portkey department. And Susan has been holding down the fort so far with great success. Harry trusted Susan. That calmed him down significantly.

Harry wondered if she hated him. They had allies because Harry stuck his spoon where it shouldn't. Werewolves were going to be used as cannon fodder because Harry (innocently!) approved the construction of a werewolf-safe hotel. And he was now realizing he never actually asked why they needed Japan, Australia, and later on Italy's backing.

And Riddle reads minds; Harry's specifically. It's not like Susan can explain the situation. She doesn't know that Harry can filter what Riddle sees/hears.

Harry brought his concentration back to his thesis which was the reason he was in this coffee shop in the first place. He wrote another



sentence.

A three-year-old could have made it make more sense.

"I have the original untranslated Atlantis Compendium," a recognizable voice suggested from behind him. Harry turned to look to see Hermione and Ron on the table behind him. He must have been really out of it to not have seen them enter. At the sudden attention, Hermione lowered her voice in uncharacteristic shyness, "It might help you."

It would not be helpful because what can Harry do with the untranslated version? Use it as a cup holder? A door stopper? "Thank you," he still responded respectfully and turned back to his unfinished work.

"Harry, I- I wanted to apologize."

Harry turned back.

"And I'm here to make sure she doesn't botch it up," Ron clarified.

"I was rude. I was beyond rude. I insulted you and made an ass of myself and I don't blame you if you don't want to forgive me. But I -I am truly sorry."

Harry sighed. After fighting Riddle and saying goodbye to Lavender he didn't have it in him to keep being mad with her. "Thank you. It means a lot that you apologized."

She smiled, but it looked wobbly and sad, like she knew it wasn't enough but didn't know what else to do, "I'll let you do your work. Thank you for hearing me out."

Ron patted him on the back as they passed by his table, "Bye, Harry."

Harry wrestled with himself for a second before calling her back, "Actually, there's something you can help me with." Hermione looked back, hopeful, "the entrance. It has a complex mechanism. I don't know how to open it and was planning on just exploding it," she gasped, "but my thesis advisor had some very strong words about that plan. You have one week to figure it out or else I'll continue with my explosion plan." It was both a punishment and forgiveness. Almost cruel. And she couldn't complain without seeming ungrateful.

Hermione went from eyes shining, "I would be honored," to a

panicked "one week!" In less than a breath.

"One week. Take it or leave it." Harry dropped the packet of papers on the table for her to take if interested.

She almost toppled an empty table in her rush to get to him, "TAKE IT! I mean," she fixed her wild curls, and took a deep breath before answering more calmly, "I would be honored."

"Under no circumstances are you to open it before we are ready, agreed?"

She practically vibrated in place and nodded fervently. Harry smiled, happy to have made her happy. This Hermione might not have had trauma and hardship to temper her but she was still Hermione. Proudful, willful, rageful, and with a vindictive heart. When not directed at himself, her worst parts were also his favorites.

Harry had his long sleeves rolled up, sunglasses on, and sunbathing in a recliner in the middle of the day on a weekday.

Why?

Well because the countryside was being attacked by a giant monster. The type that comes out once a millennia and there are only myths, songs, and poems that allude to something similar with no clear instruction on how they were destroyed as those who wrote it only heard it from people that also only heard it. A song passed down through generations can hardly be considered a reliable source.

He saw the small point that was Riddle being thrown fifty feet up the air and disappearing behind the tree line.

"This is healing my soul," Harry said to the old lady this country house belonged.

She was watering the plants with a hose uncaring about the destruction a few kilometers away. She was also blind and possibly deaf so that might contribute. Harry wasn't sure if she was aware he was there.

The one-sided fight had been going on for a few hours. The surrounding towns had been evacuated. The monster was as tall as a skyscraper, as wide as a government building, and moved very slowly creating craters with each step. It also did not seem overly violent. It

was just trying to kill the flies that were bothering him. Nothing penetrated the thick scales. Riddle was battered, bruised, and with a few broken ribs but no closer to bringing the monster down.

Could Harry have helped?

Sure.

Will he?

Hell no.

He had binoculars to see in detail as Riddle got accidentally swallowed because he had been trying to hurt the monster through the mouth. The monster did not seem to notice. Sadly, Harry knew that Riddle was alive and just having a very bad time climbing up the dark and slippery esophagus. It was enough irritation that the monster coughed him out.

Most of Riddle's expensive, fine, and one-of-a-kind robes did not survived the acidic saliva and his skin was lobster red. Harry cackled. Riddle's next plan was going for the eyes. He got stuck between the eye and eyelid when the monster blinked. A small dot of redness on the sclera showed some damage, enough that a tear formed and flushed Riddle out. Riddle was busy not drowning and swimming to his lost wand to protect himself from the fall. No one had the forethought to slow his fall. He managed to save himself milliseconds before he would have splattered on the ground but the momentum was too big to not have any damage.

"Ouch. Broke his sacrum. That's a bitch to heal," Harry's smile did not hint at a drop of sympathy. "He deserves it," Harry told the old lady just in case she thought bad of him. She kept watering the plants without response.

Half the Auror force was there and absolutely no help. After hearing that Harry was not going to help Martinez and Pike sat this one out. Smart choice. Harry would have left them to suffer in his quest for vengeance.

Harry wished he could have brought snacks. Very few Aurors were getting close to the monster instead preferring to do long-range attacks. Why did they persist on fire when the fire had done no damage in the last few hours? Harry had no idea but he was enjoying seeing the hope leave their eyes and futility settle in.

The earthquakes were getting stronger as the monster approached the house and consequently, Harry.

"Weird weather we are having," the old lady shouted. So she does know someone is here. Good to know. And she thought the sound was thunder? That would confuse anyone with the warmth of the sun and the lack of rain.

"Yeah," Harry screamed back. "Very weird."

"You want lemonade?"

Harry smiled brightly even if she couldn't see it. "I would love to!"

An Auror had shoved the collections of poems and transcribed songs into his arms before telling him to leave the danger zone like a child they had to babysit. When he wasn't enjoying seeing Riddle be launched into the stratosphere like a particularly angry firework Harry read the poems as he sipped his lemonade. The songs were surprisingly catchy. Harry hummed the chorus to the background of Riddle's screams of frustration.

One song mentioned that when it rained the monster disappeared. It could be a coincidence. It's England; it rains a lot. But Harry suspected it was an important detail because the other poems and songs also mentioned bodies of water like rivers or lakes and the monster getting "swept" by the current or "drowned" in the lake. This also could be a coincidence. Just a neat resolution to an epic fight. But it was the only clue Harry had and the monster had survived hours of Riddle going full force.

It would be a shame to cut the fight short but the monster was (slowly) heading in their direction.

"Hey, are you planning to leave?" He screamed to the old lady.

"WHAT!?"

"ARE YOU GOING TO LEAVE?"

"NO."

Harry sighed. He waited a few more minutes. Mostly because he wanted to see Riddle get stepped on after he went for the legs. For science. Harry could feel the strain it caused Riddle to maintain the shield for that amount of weight and not get crushed under the

pressure.

Riddle lived.

Harry had mixed feelings about that.

With great regret, he finally decided he needed to do something. He did not want the old lady's garden to get destroyed. Time to test out that theory. He grabbed the discarded hose and started walking towards the meadow the monster had been destroying. It makes it a non-issue to walk closer to danger when you can immediately apparate if plan A fails. When the monster was close enough he sprayed it with the hose.

And wouldn't you know it? It worked. The water caused it to shrink to the size of a large tortoise. Harry walked towards it, picked it up, looked at it curiously, walked towards a nice patch of sand, and let it go. It dug a hole and disappeared. Likely going back to hibernation not to be seen for a thousand more years as it gathered the strength to magic itself to that size.

Riddle, -bruised, bloodied, shirtless, and very very angry- walked towards him until he towered over Harry like an angry bull. It could have inspired a thousand romance novel covers. Sans the bad sunburn from the acid. And the dirt from being prematurely pushed six feet under.

Harry took his time to look him over. He'd climb Riddle like a tree with the minimum amount of provocation and that was Harry's cross to bear. He was honest about his character flaws. Fantasizing about sleeping with him was a perfectly normal hobby. One shared by the majority of the population. At this point, it was a national hobby.

Riddle's eyes were dark with fury. "The least you could have done was use your wand. It would have been less humiliating."

Harry did a poor job of not smiling, "sorry?"

Riddle grabbed Harry by the back of his neck and dragged him forward, "I really am going to kill you one day."

Harry's breath left him two continents away and had no intentions of coming back, "promises, promises," he still managed to whisper, his eyes on Riddle's lips.

At the time that they were most needed the Bad Idea Police with the

warning sirens that lived in his brain were nowhere to be found. Was this supposed to be intimidating or seductive? Harry didn't know because Riddle didn't know. But Riddle was sure as shit learning something new about Harry.

"LEMONADE?"

Harry stepped back and looked back at the blissfully oblivious lady looking in the wrong direction. "No, thanks! We are going to the hospital."

"THAT'S TOO BAD. AT LEAST THE WEATHER CLEARED UP."

Harry shoved the poems to Riddle. "Next time read instead of jumping in like a brute so that you don't waste everyone's morning."

Harry was king of adding insult to injury.

Riddle breathed through his nose. "You could have done that sooner."

Harry smiled, his creased eyes hidden behind the sunglasses, "Sure could've," he responded happily.

Riddle let go of the air in his lungs slowly before straightening his back and looking at Harry determinedly, "Punch me."

Did Harry hallucinate? "What?"

"You heard me. Punch me. You told me you punched Picardos and then went for a beer and have been friends ever since. So punch me. If I get hurt everyone will assume it was the monster."

"Punching you is tempting and will make me feel better but it's not forgiveness," Harry warned.

Riddle nodded. "Ok. Do it still."

Harry responded by breaking Riddle's nose, then punching him in the abdomen so hard that he bent over and finally hitting him in the back so that he toppled off to the ground. Harry barely resisted kicking him in the broken ribs.

True to form, Harry did feel a bit better. "Well, that was fun."

Riddle groaned from his fetal position.

And proving that he had been taking training and gym seriously he

picked Riddle up bridal style. Riddle's eyes turned to saucers as he looked at Harry incredulously.

"To be clear, I only stepped in because I didn't want her tomatoes ruined."

Harry made sure to apparate far from the hospital and walked slowly. No need to hurry.

"I'm never going to make you mad again."

"Baby, I'm furious. And we are just starting."

## Chapter 27

At Riddle's request, Harry stayed at the hospital with him instead of going to the Ministry. It was worth it if only to see the blood dripping from his face, staining his shirt and the floor. There was also the satisfying crunch of the spell forcibly correcting his broken nose. But as much fun and games as it was seeing Riddle suffer, at exactly five Harry started packing his stuff like a good little hourly employee.

Riddle looked up from his hospital bed, his nose with yellow-green discoloration peaking around the bandages, his ribs wrapped, one leg elevated to prevent swelling from his sprained ankle and his magical core so strained that it physically hurt him, "Stay," he asked or pleaded, Harry didn't care enough to differentiate.

"No," Harry responded without looking up from packing his things.

"Please stay."

"No."

"I swear it won't happen again."

Harry kept his hand on the door handle but did not open it. "It happened," he snapped. "Once was enough."

"How can I make it up to you?"

Harry turned back, angry again. "You can't. And fuck you, Riddle. You begged and pleaded for trust. For a deeper connection. And what the fuck do you do when you have it? You do the ONE thing I told you was off-limits. The fucking one thing I asked you not to do. You messed with my people." It was irrelevant that Lavender was having the time of her life in Australia. Or that Riddle wasn't the original planner. The intention had been to take a person from his life. A person he was close to and trusted. A person he could have learned to love if given enough time.

Growing up Harry had nothing; the only things truly his were his friends. As such he was territorial and possessive of them. And Riddle knowingly crossed that line.



"I'm sorry," Riddle whispered helplessly.

Harry was over this. "You know what? I'm sorry too. I'm sorry I ever gave you the impression that any type of relationship was possible. That was my mistake."

If Harry were honest with himself, which he rarely is, he would admit it was not solely about Riddle. Harry knew himself well enough to know that, at the end of the day, Riddle would be another knife Harry would use to hurt himself.

A self-fulfilling prophecy in Petunia's acidic voice that said he was worthless and unlovable and that this was the best he could hope for. Harry has worked very hard in therapy to shake off that voice and know when he was being self-destructive. And being with Riddle in any capacity was just that, self-sabotage. No matter how Riddle wanted to dress it up it would be another cupboard under the stairs. Nothing his and everything of value taken away. Stifled and controlled.

Harry slammed the door closed and left without looking back. He did his best to block Riddle's emotions for the rest of the night.

"Nice of you to show up, Potter. The rest of us have been here since seven," Draco greeted spitefully.

Wonderful. Just what Harry wanted at the unholy hour of 9am before his third cup of coffee. Draco did not get the memo that Harry was on his very last nerve and it was the thickness of a spiderweb strand.

Harry smiled, his eyes soft. "Yes, that makes sense." Draco looked shocked and confused but still suspicious. He's learning; Harry was proud. "Being inefficient does take more time. It's nice of you to compensate without being asked."

Look at him being all grown up and resorting to petty insults instead of violence. His universe's Draco would have loved not being stripped to pieces like carne asada. This Draco would never know the unhealed version of Harry and doesn't realize how grateful he should be.

Draco's response was drowned by the screams coming from Riddle's office. Fight forgotten they both turned to the uncharacteristically (when Harry wasn't in the office) closed door.

"He's in a mood today," Harry complained as if he wasn't 99.99% sure

he was the reason their boss was in a mood.

The screams stopped abruptly and a dull thud followed by uneven rolling was heard.

"You think that was a head or a limb?" Harry asked as he sipped the watered-down coffee from the cafeteria. Disgusting. It only had the spirit of coffee. A coffee bean once touched the water...many years ago.

Draco made a noise of distress, "Definitely head," he squeaked.

"You should go in," Harry advised Draco.

Draco's eyes were huge. "You should go in. You're the favorite."

"I'm not the favorite."

Certainly not at this moment in time.

Draco took a break from his fear to look at Harry incredulously. "He took you for ice cream during lunch break. He never even used to take lunch breaks."

They were now talking over the revived screams from behind the door. "It's in my contract that I have a one-hour lunch break," Harry defended.

"And he took you for ice cream. Outside the Ministry. The two-timed Minister of Magic left the Ministry because his assistant wanted ice cream."

Draco was making it out more than it had been. "It's not that deep. You underestimate how much of a gossip Riddle is. He wanted to hear about the Margaret-John saga."

Draco's eyes were wide and disbelieving, his eyebrows raised, his mouth open, lost for words, until he exploded, "Are you even hearing yourself?!"

"Anyway, you are the assistant now," Harry pointed out. "Go win yourself some ice cream. Try having the work done before 10pm and he might have time for it."

Draco did not move. "And you are my assistant. So go assist the assistant."

"I already received a note with my duties for today." Harry showed him the small paper with the instructions to fix the first-floor bathrooms in neat letters. It wasn't signed, but they both recognized their boss's handwriting.

Draco's face turned white and he stopped breathing. "He doesn't want to see you."

"Nope."

"Well damn. We are all dead." Draco looked at him, pleading, "But maybe you could -"

"No."

"It's very selfish of you to anger him."

Harry was insulted, "What makes you think I angered him?"

"He doesn't want to see you!" Draco whispered-shouted in agitation.

"Oh, right."

"This affects all of us, you know."

"Surprisingly, not my problem." Harry grabbed Draco by his shoulders and turned him towards the door. Draco planted his feet and refused to move an inch. The screams, a different voice now, started the moment he touched Draco so Harry retrieved his hands as if they had been burned. The screams stopped. Harry made an annoyed -tsh sound.

Ignorant of what happened, Draco kept pleading, "He might-"

"Hilarious but no."

"I would owe you-"

"Let's not owe each other anything," Harry responded brightly.

"Harry," Draco begged with a whinny voice and round eyes. He grabbed Harry's hand between his to complete the cheap manipulation tactic. The floor trembled and Harry snatched his hand away from Draco.

"Brush up on your blood-cleaning spells," Harry said as parting wisdom. "And try to avoid war!"

Draco frowned and was distracted from the sounds of torture, "War? What war?"

This beautiful idiot. "Exactly. Keep it that way."

Draco scoffed, back to hating him now that the manipulation ended, "Weirdo."

For the first time since Riddle discovered their connection, it was completely shut—a steel wall that Riddle was spending a lot of energy and concentration on maintaining. Likely not the intended reason, but the physical and mental space went a long way to calm Harry's anger. Nancy, with her awkward shin-length skirt and her petty, vindictive, corporate nature, kept him otherwise entertained. She won this battle but not the war. He finished coordinating the bathroom repairs an hour before lunch and reluctantly returned to the office. He knew he wasn't in the position to take a two-hour lunch break.

Harry frowned as he saw an older man almost entirely pressed against a tense Draco with his hand caressing Draco's lower back. Harry sent a stinging hex before he was fully aware of what he was doing. The older man jumped in surprise and abruptly turned to see who had hexed him. Harry made no effort to obscure it had been him as he looked into the man's eyes and twirled his wand. The wand was not needed but it served as a prop for intimidation purposes. This world didn't know that they had to be scared of him regardless of the presence of a wand.

"Potter," Draco greeted tensely, a red flush of shame covering his face. Harry nodded but did not take his eyes off the man. With a receding hairline, pot belly, and soft chin he wouldn't be anyone's first choice unless he had the world's best humor. Even then, Draco was painfully straight. (A loss that the gay community hasn't recovered from.)

The man sputtered, "How dare you! What's your name? I'll have you fired this second."

How Vernon of him. Harry already hated him and it hasn't been one full minute.

At that moment Riddle and Lestrangle turned the corner. Riddle's eyes immediately went to Harry's wand. Harry thought he had seen Riddle angry before. Turns out he has never seen Riddle angry. A dark, oppressive cloud of magic enveloped the hallway in seconds. It felt like the dry heat of a furnace on his skin and a physical pressure on

his chest making it hard to breathe. "What happened here?" He demanded.

The older man lost all of his bluster at Riddle's low tone. Even Harry didn't dare cut the tension with a snarky joke. Draco stepped back and slightly behind Harry. The coward.

Proving that audacity was free, the unknown man said, "This child attacked me out of nowhere."

Riddle's lips twitched in the parody of a smile while his eyes held a simmering rage. "Funny. I'd even forgotten what Mr. Potter's wand looked like. Say, what did you do to provoke him?"

The man flinched, realizing that he would not find help from Riddle. "Provoke him? I did nothing," he spluttered.

Eyes that glowed with barely restrained violent magic zeroed in on Harry. Draco took another step to be fully behind Harry. "Harry, did he touch you?"

So the man had a reputation for wandering hands? Harry was tempted to say yes and have the man lose a limb or two. His silence stretched as he debated it. Riddle took out his wand. The man was stunned silent, his head shook 'no' desperately.

"No," Harry finally responded before his intrusive thoughts won.

"Keep it that way or you won't like the consequences," Riddle warned. "Draco," Riddle snapped, "get everything ready for the meeting."

Harry put a hand on Draco's shoulder to stop him from moving. The hallway temperature dropped another ten degrees. Harry still hadn't taken his eyes off the stranger. "I'm sorry, Mr. Riddle, Mr. Malfoy is on his lunch break. I'll take over the preparations." He pushed Draco away and Draco meekly left.

He met the man's eyes, entered his mind, and searched for every memory that included Draco. He saw a long history of the man going to Malfoy's manor and parties, cozying up with Draco's parents, and being a creep to Draco.

Harry looked back to make sure Draco had already turned the corner. "Actually, yes. He put his hands down my trousers."

There was a mist of red where the man once stood.

*Intrusive thoughts: 999+*

*Harry: -3*

Harry jumped several steps back to avoid the blood that was now raining and threw an annoyed look at Riddle. "Well, that was excessive."

Someone gagged in the background.

Lestrangle, Harry assumed.

Harry made a disgusted face when blood from the ceiling dripped onto his hair and face. He used his sleeve to clean his face and only managed to spread it. Damn magical blood. "Warn a man. I know you have to find new ways to keep killing interesting but have consideration on my skin and wardrobe." Magical blood burns and is a bitch to wash off clothes. Riddle, of course, by magic or by luck, had no blood stains; Harry found it deeply unfair. Harry moved further down the hallway to prevent any more blood from dripping on him.

Lestrangle wasn't moving. Wasn't even breathing. Like a cockroach when the lights get turned on that believes that if they don't move they won't be seen. Harry couldn't blame him. There weren't even bits of skin or bone. Everything had disintegrated into liquid. The wand hadn't moved; Harry doubted Riddle even used it. And this was a weakened Riddle from a drained core.

Riddle followed him. He looked in a better mood as he watched Harry's blood-stained face. The intensity was unsettling as usual. Harry could see his reflection in the completely black eyes. It set off a symphony of alarms from the primal part of his brain that recognized he was prey and he should run. It was an unfamiliar feeling. He watched Riddle get closer with large curious eyes. Even after everything Harry has done and said to Riddle, every reason he has given Riddle to be angry, Harry doesn't believe Riddle could or would hurt him. Probably naive of him to think a beast would stop being a beast just because it wanted to own him.

*Vicious, my Harry, lying like that to get him killed*, Riddle thought in amazement as he took a handkerchief and raised it to Harry's face. Riddle waited for a second with the handkerchief hovering over his

face for permission. Harry debated it for a moment before allowing it with a nod.

Harry glared, offended at being blamed, "You could have said no! You didn't even know the reason."

"Close your eyes." Harry closed them and let Riddle work on the blood covering his lashes. "The reason is meaningless; you felt threatened enough to pull your wand out."

*That's it?* Harry opened the eye Riddle wasn't working on to watch him curiously.

Riddle took his chin and angled his face up as he cleaned his neck. "You have never raised your wand in defense. Not with invaders in my apartment, not for the surprise attack in Diagon Alley, not when you had a wand to your neck. Not even in front of a damn colossal. That piece of lard did not deserve to be the first. If you are to raise your wand, it should be to me." Riddle's finger dug into his chin as he brought Harry's face closer. "Your anger is mine."

Harry blinked slowly as he processed the words. "You are an obsessive piece of shit and I don't know what I did to deserve you as karmic punishment but it has better be no less than universe-destroying. My right ear is burning."

Obediently Riddle cleaned the blood off his ear. *You exist. That's all you had to do.*

*Great....Just. Great.*

Suddenly Riddle smiled, *We can blame this on your new sexual harassment policy.*

Harry raised an eyebrow. *I don't remember death as one of the corrective options.*

*Eh. It was vague. A good lawyer won't have too much problem winning the case.*

Harry narrowed his eyes. *Hilarious.*

Lestrangle loudly cleared his throat, "I thought you were fighting."

Harry blinked, having forgotten Lestrangle was there, "Are you asking me?"

Riddle responded without taking his eyes off Harry, "Don't mistake his docility for agreement. He would throw me in front of the Hogwarts Express and complain to my ghost about the inconvenience of blood staining the windows." Amusement shone in his eyes.

"I would never do that," Harry denied. Riddle had the nerve to look doubtful. "Susan would kill me," Harry clarified. Riddle rolled his eyes with a soft, "Of course."

"You know how expensive it is to fix the only magical train in all of England? There are only two people in the world that make the parts. The shipping alone would be astronomical."

Riddle narrowed his eyes, "Your only worry in killing me would be to hide it from Susan."

"Yes. Of course." It was not a lie and they both knew that.

Riddle smiled and changed the subject, "Mr. Potter, can you be so kind as to fill out the accidental death in the workplace form?"

Harry stepped back putting a professional distance now that they were talking about work. Riddle seemed reluctant to let go of his face until he physically could not hold it. "Of course, sir. Are we going with 'death by accidental spellfire' or 'death by magical malfunction of wards'?"

"Spellfire. I don't want to spend money on the unnecessary mandatory ward check. LeStrange, clean up the mess." He looked at his watch.

"You have fifteen minutes to get ready for the meeting since you so kindly volunteered to save your dear friend. It's a lunch meeting. Meet me at the floo when you are ready."

Harry's soul died. "Yes, sir."

"You asked for this so I don't want any complaints."

"Of course not, sir. Wouldn't dare." Riddle threw him a hard stare before leaving.

"I don't think you have any right to judge," Harry snapped at LeStrange once they were alone in the hallway, "being that you are married to Bellatrix and all."

LeStrange raised his hands in innocence, still very much judging. "It's just a very odd way of being mad, is all."



Harry sighed in annoyance before leaving him to clean the mess alone. He had a meeting to prepare.

Bellatrix was trying to impress their audience. Harry wanted to vomit from secondhand embarrassment. They had just sat in the private room in the fancy restaurant and Bellatrix decided this was the day she would delve into politics.

Without meaning to, his eyes automatically lock with Riddle as they share a long-suffering look. For a second, Harry forgets he is mad. It's difficult to hold to the anger with the only person who understands his suffering in meetings.

*I want to disperse my atoms into the great abyss.*

Riddle grimaced. *Harry, it's not that bad.*

*A death by fire would be preferable. Are the chairs flammable?*

*Stop thinking about building a pyre.*

Harry started imagining his skin blackening and crusting as he gratefully welcomed the fire.

"Bellatrix," Riddle snapped. The table recoiled at the seemingly uncalled for aggressiveness. Riddle breathed deeply, shooting Harry an annoyed look. Harry made sure to have the most clueless and innocent face when the table looked at him for an explanation. The universal *I don't know* face, *he's just crazy*. "Let's start the meeting," Riddle said more calmly.

Harry made himself pay attention. He wanted to confirm his suspicions of an upcoming war. But it was soooo boring. They weren't even talking about anything important. He only noticed he had stopped paying attention when he heard Riddle complain.

"You are wasting your time. He's eating. We are all just white noise," Riddle said, charming but long-suffering as if inviting that person in on a secret joke, but the proprietary arm he threw behind Harry's chair and the slight narrowing of his eyes warning the person said a different story.

*Rude.* Harry threw a sharp glance at Riddle to let him know that he

had heard. Riddle passed him a plate of cheesecake and the next thing Harry knew they were saying their goodbyes and leaving the restaurant. Yeah, he wasn't getting any information any time soon. It seems that the only reason he had a successful Auror career was because he never worked the lunch hour. Otherwise, his reputation would have been very different.

"What did I miss?" Harry asked as they entered the street. He offered Riddle one of the free mints that had been in a bowl at the exit before eating the other one.

"Nothing. You didn't miss anything," Riddle said, taking the mint.

"Really?" Harry didn't hide the skepticism.

"Really."

Would Riddle even lie to him if Harry point blank asked? "So you finally want to make werewolves proper citizens with all the privileges including education and you want me to believe it's not because by being citizens they will automatically get drafted to war?"

Riddle popped the mint in his mouth. "Sadly and quite regretfully, I have no control over your thoughts. And if I had that wouldn't be at the top of the list of things I would make you believe."

"Fair." But useless. "Are you planning a war?" Harry asked, in the middle of Diagon Alley with the sun shining in his eyes and the background noise of people going about their day in blissful ignorance.

Riddle didn't hesitate, "Always," and then didn't elaborate.

Harry almost finished his mint before he got impatient, "And?" He pressed, knowing no one was paying attention and that Riddle's lackeys were surrounding them and keeping the masses at a distance.

Riddle looked smug about having his attention, not at all concerned about having this conversation in public. Harry wanted to punch him. He resisted for the sake of gaining information.

Riddle relented for the sake of continued peace, "Foreign powers are getting too comfortable attacking. And when a country has a large military presence they think twice before attacking. Be happy, my Harry, I'm basically preventing war and being disgustingly noble at the same time. Aren't you happy?"

"Hmm."

"Why are you asking? Are you perhaps interested in helping?"

Harry scrunched his nose. "That sounds like a lot of work." And unpaid overtime.

"Your sister just joined the Auror department, didn't she?"

Harry hated that he tensed. "So I've heard," he responded casually.

Riddle hummed. "You aren't going to get all heroic on me are you?"

Harry thought about it and tried to be as unbiased as possible. "I'll cross that bridge when I get to it." He debated for a moment whether to add or explain but saw no harm in saying the truth. "You are a good leader, Riddle." Also a bad person but they weren't mutually exclusive. "You care about this shit-stained country in a way that few politicians do. I would hear your reasoning for war before jumping to conclusions."

Also, in our queen, Susan, we trust. He will not stress about it now if there was no concrete plan.

He wasn't even too worried about his sister if a war broke out. Whether she knew or not, she was surrounded by protectors. Pike and Martinez would die before letting anything happen to her. Just as Harry would die (kill, lie, cheat, massacre, burn cities to the ground, and worse) to protect anyone his friends considered family.

Riddle had a complicated expression on his face and stayed silent, thinking. Harry wanted werewolves to have basic human rights. And if there was a war, well. He will cross that bridge when he gets to it.

After all, he has stopped wars, started wars, and finished wars.

Nothing new.

By the third day, he felt his anger settle into almost playful pettiness. (Pike would not call it playful but Harry did not take anything that Pike said seriously.) Riddle should be thanking the gods that the version of Harry that landed on his doorstep was the mature, adult version that had years on his healing journey. Because the traumatized, violent, pre-therapy Harry of his twenties would have left a crater where the Ministry stood. Harry had come a long way.

(But if Riddle pushed him any more Harry will happily scale back.)

"When's the next meeting?" Riddle asked Draco as they walked to Riddle's office after flooing in. Harry numbly trotted behind with the whole group of sycophants as his mind wandered, still full and lazy from lunch.

Draco started frantically searching his papers. "I wrote it down, sir. Give just a moment to search for it."

Riddle turned from Draco to him, tall enough to see Harry at the back of the group, "When is that meeting?"

Harry blinked from his contemplations and shrugged, "How should I know? I haven't been going to meetings before today."

Riddle narrowed his eyes in irritation. "Where's the agenda?" he snapped.

"Last place you left it." Harry hadn't touched it since the fight.

"Can you look for it?"

"Sure," Harry agreed mildly. When they arrived at Riddle's office, he didn't have to look too far to find it. It was exactly where Harry had left it. "Here you go."

Riddle opened it to today and then returned to the pages before, "There's nothing."

Harry made a herculean effort not to smile. "Of course there's nothing. You have to write in it."

"It doesn't update magically?"

Harry kept his eyes blank, voice dry and monotonous. "That would be convenient. Make sure to merchandize that idea if you ever invent it."

For a moment anger shined through Riddle's eyes before he stomped on the emotion and walked away, barking commands at Draco.

Harry knew he was replaceable.

But Riddle knew damn well it was a downgrade.

That night Riddle knocked on his door aggressively. Harry glanced at the clock. It was late, even by Riddle's standards. Harry marked where he was reading for his assignment before getting up to get to the door.

"Can we talk?"

"I'm busy," Harry responded, as he stood -doing nothing. He put a leg out to prevent the chicken from escaping the apartment. He was aggressively pecked for his trouble.

Riddle looked annoyed, "Margaret got proposed last week and I have to find out by the Ministry newsletter congratulating her and Pete? Who the fuck is Pete? I should have him killed. I was rooting for her to get back with John."

Was it another petty dig from Harry? Yes, yes it was. But it wasn't his fault that Riddle had lost his telenovela subscription and missed an entire full season of the latest drama. Harry was team Pete. John lost his opportunity. We are in the era of not giving bastards second chances.

"Didn't think you'd care."

Riddle narrowed his eyes.

Harry smiled and closed the door.

When Harry saw Riddle eating lunch with Brenda and Gilbert he knew it was war. Fucking Brenda looked pleased with herself and kept giving Harry smug looks. The glare Harry shot Riddle would have brought countries to their knees. Riddle's eyes shone with amusement.

Harry would have never thought Riddle would stoop this low. The bar was on the floor and he brought a damn digger to excavate. Satan's second basement was higher than this. It would have been less of an insult to be fired and thrown from his apartment like an old dish rag.

*Oh, it's on. It's so fucking on. If it's war you want it's war you'll get.*

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